

Essays

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Twenty-eight Artists, Educators, Writers and Poets

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**KARA WALKER-NO
KARA WALKER-YES
KARA WALKER-?**

by

Twenty-eight Artists, Educators,
Writers and Poets

with an introduction by

Howardena Pindell

Midmarch Arts Press

New York City

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Since there is no established rule regarding whether or not to add a hyphen in African American we have accepted each writer's preference.

INTRODUCTION: KARA WALKER-NO/YES/?

Although our individual approaches were different, Betye Saar and I tried to encourage dialogue about Kara Walker's work in 1997. I received an enraged letter from a very well known African-American artist, demanding I back off—this from someone I had not even thought of contacting. I wrote back saying that he could not silence me . . . that I had a right to express my opinion. I also received a violently condescending, aggressive phone call from an irate, infuriated white woman art critic after I returned from South Africa in 1997, where I had given a paper at the at the Second Johannesburg Biennale Conference, about the use of negative stereotypes by African-American artists. During the call she basically, as bigots often do, aggressively grilled and questioned me about what I had said at the Biennale, reprimanding me for daring to refuse to jump on the pro-negative-racial stereotype—Kara Walker band wagon and be an agreeable collaborator or—remain silent. It was clear that she would find a two-way conversation involving verbal reciprocity intolerable. As is often the case when dealing with aggressive people, it had to be their way or else; ours was a one-way “discussion” where I had no recourse, but to “answer” her questions and just listen. There was the bullying aspect of the power of “white privilege” behind her and the “mighty” power of the establishment. It was an anti-dialogue conversation.

In 2007 I was approached by Cynthia Navaretta of Midmarch Art Press. She, also had noted how the mainstream media was flooding us with enthusiastically positive reviews of Kara Walker's work, that there were individuals upset and concerned by the strong-arming of the dialogue by the powers-that-be and that there seemed to be an ongoing squelching and silencing of dissent of anyone who dared to voice a negative critique. (During the interim between 1997 and the present I had heard of white dealers who had considered showing African-American artists who had been warned by other white dealers and chastised for even considering the idea of showing the work of African-Americans and warned that white patrons would not patronize their galleries, if they saw African-Americans there.)

Cynthia Navaretta bravely, in an increasingly hostile climate attempting to silence all those who questioned the manic intensity of the positive criticism of Kara Walker, invited me to gather artists, writers, critics, arts administrators, collectors and curators and ask them if they wanted to submit a comment of any length. Soon it became a vital grapevine and people were contacting me

wanting to vent their outrage at what appeared to be a manipulated effort to force a type of work, which humiliated the African-American community down our collective throats, mocking any efforts for positive change. The sponsors of this charade seemed to see the scene as some kind of an amusing masquerade—a covert racist way of pushing, in name only, an African-American artist, while at the same time keeping the status quo or less, and appearing publicly, to the outside world, to be generous and even liberal or progressive.

“... I divorce myself from the cause before
I really let it sink in.
Means having to admit my weakness
Over and over again
Means having to submit to a higher law
Instead of resting
Easy on fat wallets and
Good times...”

From catalogue published by MIT Press for the exhibition, “Kara Walker, Narratives of a Negress,” shown at MIT, Skidmore and Williams College Museums, 2003.

During the gathering of the writers, the pressure was on from some members of the insider art world of museums, art galleries and auction houses and mainstream art periodicals to discourage participation in the book. One writer was intimidated and told not to participate and worse by a white museum professional. Some of those approached by the publisher to edit the collection refused to participate and made a hasty retreat. No white women writers would contribute their comments and some were down-right hostile. The final group of contributors consists of men and women artists, writers, collectors, arts administrators, poets, former museum curators, performance artists and educators. The essays included are “non-pro” commentary, with added sections of quotations from the mainstream media, plus an appendix section of historical information. Since dialogue has been squelched and intimidated and in some cases even threatened, we have opened a blog where anyone who wishes may enter an opinion and dialogue back and forth on an ongoing basis. You do not need to sign your name. The blog address is: <http://www.karawalker-no-yes.blogspot.com>

Cathy Halbreich, Director of the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, the originating institution for the Kara Walker show that traveled to New York’s Whitney Museum of American Art in October 2007, stated in the October 8, 2007 issue of the *New Yorker* that Walker was “heroic under the criticism” referring to the rumble Betye and I had created. She perceived the criticism as “generational.” “I understand that these women came of age when ambiguity was poison, but their efforts to silence Kara Walker made me sad. Even as I sort of

understood the context out of which this speech arose." The sense of underlying condescension is clear—Halbreich's own experience was to narcissistically define my personal experience and perception as if she were in my skin. She had pronounced herself in charge of my and Betye's reactions, limiting it to her own "acceptable" personal boundaries and assuming we as artists would have no other recourse but to bow to her opinion. I find this so common with white commentators in the art world corporate arena—a basic command—"Be silent" or just plain "I am white and I am in charge and what I say goes about your life experience." They take no notice that there are KKK and worse on Long Island where some of us work (as documented by the Southern Poverty Law Center which states that there are 26 active hate groups in New York State. www.splcenter.org/). I had a humiliating experience when I was almost thrown out of the Parrish Museum in Southampton in 2008, because I was not a member (and the only non-white visible at the moment) at a champagne reception for a panel on which I was a participant. I have sadly run into this in the women's movement, where white women cannot tolerate your experience, so by shouting one down and demanding a superior rank based on assumed "white privilege" they demand your silence or compliance. So that they can remake history in their own image and then accept you so that we "together" can have a good laugh over genocide.

Another side is the disrespect shown older people of any race; Saar and I are not teenagers. This is basic racism 101 when even a white child may disrespect elderly non-white persons no matter their age. A parallel example of this has been brought "front and center" with the election of Barack Obama. White and usually male commentators in the mainstream media refer to him as Barack and to his wife as Michelle. But they refer to the former president as Bush or George Bush. It is demeaning to call non-white people by their first names no matter their age, education, rank or status. But it is fascinating to note that in spite of this unspoken rule, Kara Walker is usually referred to as Kara Walker (as was once done to some non-Europeans in South Africa under apartheid) they had "honorary white status." Behind closed doors—who knows.

Years ago, during the early days of the negative reactions and even requests and petitions that Kara Walker's MacArthur Genius Grant be rescinded, a woman spokesperson from the MacArthur Foundation brushed the protests off in a comment in a publication I have since buried, and stated that protests of Kara Walker's work were "political" (and therefore should be dismissed). (See David D'Arcy's article "Kara Walker Kicks up a Storm," in *Modern Painters*, April 2006, p. 59.)

Robert Hobbs, one of her collectors and also the commissioner for the São Paulo Biennale in 2002, nominated her to represent the U.S. in the United States Pavilion and then simply announced in an article in *Art Papers*, April 2002, that the controversy was over, as if in saying it was over, made it so.

When the dialogue is not two-way and someone must be dominated at all costs, even threatened and shunned, I feel one must ask why must the "conversation" be skewed, and to whose benefit? Who gains from this pathological control? What do they not want you to see or be aware of? There is no room for airing authentic opinions in the same arena. It is fairly obvious that the art world is run somewhat like an authoritarian "religious" cult with clear lines of power and certain taboos set by the corporate sector. For example, it is taboo to have truly, genuine work by non-whites and women, that is threatening to white and male supremacy and permits exception only for an artist with an elaborate pedigree, a huge resumé, a powerful parent, or one who has married "well." In most cases the "god" of this religion is money and power and endless Teflon.

In an excerpt from ART 21/ PBS The Melodrama of 'Gone with the Wind,' A Film with Kara Walker: Kara Walker [says] it's that feeling of needing to make this offering as a form of truth-telling, no matter how awful it is . . . and then sometimes that work is just ridiculous and silly and weird.

Interviewer: That sort of truth-telling must be exhausting. Do you ever question yourself: Why me?

Walker: I never say, why me? I gave myself this job. (LAUGHS)

However, in the *New Yorker*, October 8, 2007, a pro-Kara Walker article by Hilton Ales, "The Shadow Act," Skip Gates of the Dubois Center, Harvard University states:

"No one could mistake the images of Kara Walker . . . as realistic images! Only the visually illiterate could mistake their post-modern critiques for realistic portrayals."

In an interview on NPR Radio on March 7, 2008 with African-American talk show host Farai Chideya, who quoted Betye Saar's criticism: I felt the work of Kara Walker was sort of revolting and negative and a form of betrayal to the slaves, particularly woman and children, and that it was basically for the amusement and the investment of the white art establishment.

Walker's response was: I think the first thing that's striking to me is that I'm not making work about reality. I'm not. I am making work about images, you know, I am making work about fictions that have been handed down to me, and I am interested in these fictions because I am an artist, and any sort of attempt at getting at the truth of a thing, you kind of have to wade through these levels of fictions, and that's where the work is coming from.

What does her image of a nude black woman having sex with the skeletal corpse of a Confederate soldier accomplish, except to create a fiction that becomes a truth in the eye of a beholder eager to continue the lie of the racist. Or the work which shows a nude, pregnant African-American with amputated legs, without any hope for help, presented with cartoon-like eroticism. Or the Black child gleefully having intercourse with a horse—who is that fiction for? How many reviews and articles have I read that state that she portrays "Black Life." Yet

in the first quotation above during her interview for ART:21, she literally says she is a truth-teller. This is very troubling especially since work which is factual and about resistance is pushed away by the art world establishment, shunned and derisively mocked as annoying in its reminder of the country's ugly history. It is preferred that we ignore it and as Robert Hobbs notes in an article in *Art Papers* about Kara Walker that the African-Americans he spoke to were "philosophical" about slavery.

To step aside from the controversy surrounding her work . . . it might be interesting to note that the invention of paper according to Susanne Schlapfer-Geiser in Scherenschnitte began in China around 100 A.D. . . . and Scherenschnitte began moving around as a medium in 750 A.D. with "Chinese war prisoners taking paper making into the middle east and Europe. Schernschnitte was popular in 1000 A.D. and during the "Sung dynasty (10th-13th centuries), using white, black and colored paper and silk. Then, scherenschnitte moved from "China to Austria by way of Indonesia, Persia and the Balkan Peninsula, Poland, Russia, Switzerland, Germany and the United States through the Pennsylvania Dutch. She discusses the silhouette and how it was used on Egyptian grave stones and Greek vases. As mentioned in a number of mainstream reviews, Etienne Silhouette, minister of finance under Louis XV, recommended silhouettes as more reasonable replacements for costly miniatures." He budgeting earned him a reputation as being cheap and his name became synonymous with that quality. Schlapfer-Geiser states that later silhouettes were "filled in with India ink."

In the library of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Manhattan one can see works by Aaron Douglas (1899-1958) created for the WPA utilizing silhouettes. The four-part work is titled "Aspects of Negro Life," 1934, oil on canvas. He explored the use of the silhouette throughout his career as a Harlem Renaissance artist employing them in murals as well as in smaller works on paper. (See: "Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist," edited by Susan Earle, with essays by Kinshasha Conwill, Dr. Richard Powell, David Driskell and Kirschke, 2007 and "Art of the Harlem Renaissance: Art of Black Americans," with essays by Mary Campbell Schmidt, David Driskell, David Levering Lewis and Deborah Willis Ryan, 1987.)

In early January of 2009, I went to *Strand Books* on a whim and found a catalogue of the work of the white South African artist William Kentridge ("William Kentridge:Tapestries," Yale University Press, 2007) published for his show at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, with essays by Gabriel Guercio, Okwui Enwezor and Ian Vladislavic. The catalogue shows his silhouettes of black cut-paper collages, drawings and tapestries, all dated 2000 to 2007. They are full-figure silhouettes and were also shown in a huge animated light board in a Times Square, New York City installation titled "Shadow Procession," 2001. The silhouette tapestries are called the Porter Series and are dated 2006. In Gabriele Guercio's essay "*Becoming Aware in a World of People on the Move*," he

says "Shadowgraphy ranges from the simple conjuring of a rabbit's shadow with one's hands to the sophisticated devices used in the theater, painting, viewing machines, photography, and cinema. Humans seem to have an enduring fascination with shadows. In ancient and modern cultures alike, they are regarded as double, virtual bodies or reflection of the soul, and they have been studied in both science and art for what they can tell us about perception. . . . Pliny, who had previously noted that the art of painting was also said to have begun with tracing someone's shadow (*Natural History* 35.15) positively associates shadows artistic representation, as well as with an image's peculiar ability to account for absence, if not death, by preserving someone's effigy. . . ."

In 1999 I gave a talk at the Detroit Institute of the Arts "Representation/Indentity/Resistance" concerning my work and the work of Pat Ward Williams, whose work is about resistance to the brutality of racism. During the talk I addressed the legacy of negative racial stereotypes and referred to a German children's book brought in by one of my graduate students whose parents were Holocaust survivors. The book distorted the Jewish people and African people with sadistic racist images and were intended to convey the meaning of punishment to children. "Struwwelpeter" written by a German psychiatrist, Heinrich Hoffman, was widely read in the 1920s and '30s. It described the physical mutilation of children as fitting punishment. It frightened me when I thought about the holocaust that followed.

Years before my knowledge of these books, I met a European adult with a prosthetic limb that replaced one that an enraged parent had amputated as punishment when he was a child.

I do not see the exultation of negative stereotype images as being in a vacuum. Negative images are usually created and disseminated as part of the oppression of people of color in order to justify stealing their land, labor and resources.

At the request of the editors of *Art Papers* magazine, in 2002, I expanded a letter to the editor in response to "A conversation with Robert Hobbs." I forwarded the letter to the white male editors but they refused to publish the letter and would not answer my calls or e-mails. (*Art Papers* chose Kara Walker as guest of honor for their fund raiser benefit held at Atlantic College of Art in 2002.) The letter contained the following comment:

I feel that the popularity with whites of negative stereotypes is a combination of restricted gaze and constricted empathy. Children are taught by their parents who to respect and who not to respect. . . . Who to gaze on favorably and who not to see. I feel that work that uses the negative stereotype against African-Americans is welcomed by the art world because the negative image is a reflection of what the child was permitted to see or imagine. A person of color was not seen in a positive way, if seen at all. To have a person of color give you those images as if to say that they agree with your imprinted gaze, makes the work hypnotically

enticing for whites. One is off the hook. No need to worry about racism (or remedies). This person of color appears to agree with the restricted gaze and the total lack of empathy (taught by one's parents and enforced by white society at large and the media. (If you changed your gaze and became empathetic, a white ran the risk of being called an "n_____ lover" or worse.)

The commentary submitted is far different in intent than the mainstream commentary. It is not necessary flattering nor written to keep investment values high or to raise the values of one's collection so that your tax deduction is increased, or to keep advertisers happy and unthreatened. You are welcome, as mentioned earlier to include your comments one way or the other on the blog:

<http://www.karawalker-no-yes.blogspot.com>

I would like to thank Cynthia Navaretta of Midmarch Arts Press for her support, encouragement and patience as the project progressed, unfolded and more and more individuals wanted to contribute their points of view. I thank all of the family and friends and acquaintances who dialogued with me about the issues and thank also those with whom I argued. This has been a complex project that revealed itself to be more and more complicated as I thought, read and explored a number of issues. I felt that the mainstream art community was holding on to the murky past, shoving any threats to their "dinosaur sovereignty under the rug. In an attempt to "maintain" safety and perform business as usual, when they can see all around them hints that if things do not change for the better we will all be forced to cling to life boats made of air or drown, headed for the bottom on the Titanic.

—Howardena Pindell



SECTION I: KARA WALKER-NO

KARA WALKER: CELEBRATING 21ST CENTURY PRIMITIVISM

Even in the beginning of the 21st century, America's art industry, still believes African-American artists are somehow by nature "primitive artists." There is a mind set in America that saw Denzel Washington's *Training Day* as his greatest performance; and also, Halle Berry's *Monster Ball* as her greatest performance. Both of these brilliant entertainers were given the prestigious Academy Awards for their role as stereotypical characters. Prior to that, no African-American had been honored in 74 years! In the film *Basquait* his paintings were referred to as "art from the gutter." His art forms were more interesting to some of our leading art institutions for what they considered crude primitivism; and thus, were celebrated as the greatest African-American paintings of 20th century mainstream primitivism. I am disturbed, uneasy, depressed, and disappointed by the new-found symbol of African-American 21st century Primitivism—visual artist Kara Walker.

My thoughts were ambivalent about speaking out against the first African American artist to have a solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) since Jacob Lawrence (1944) and William Edmondson (1937); and even more, being a fellow artist appearing to infringe upon Walker's freedom of speech. I have pondered hard and long, and realized "[s]ometimes people fail to see that individual decisions have universal consequences."¹ I am an educator of fine arts, a practicing visual artist, a husband, and a father of four daughters. My concern is not one-dimensional. I understand how serious my comments are in addressing what has become a sad reality in the pages of Black-self-hatred.² Walker has chosen to celebrate what I see as 21st century primitivism. One cannot discuss Walker retrospectively, because I believe she is still developing as a creative being; but what I am interested in, is her visual content and the issue of EMPOWERMENT! There is a duty that moves me to express my views on the works of Walker, who has been in a position in the art world to speak to us all in a visual language on the American experience of Black and White relationships—segments of academia and of the art community are now celebrating Walker. I am not a believer that, if it is accepted by America's mainstream art community, then it must be valid. The first time I saw Walker's work was at a group exhibition at the Mitchell Museum in Mt. Vernon, Illinois. Its former Director of Exhibitions, Michael Beam, invited me to see a print by Walker, in which an image of an African-American girl was biting off the head

of a white doll. My initial thoughts were anger and hatred beyond reason. Yet, upon closer, observation, I noticed a stage. What, a stage? Is it all a stage for the Walker play?

In 2005, during the Faculty Art Exhibition in the Surplus Gallery at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, a group of my respected White colleagues were speaking admiringly of Walker's fame. They enthusiastically stated that her content and process were great. "I disagree," I stated. Their stung facial expressions made it clear they were not expecting such a response from me. I wondered at that moment, if my loyalty to my "Blackness" had been compromised by not supporting Walker's mainstream success over my assessment of her work, which I considered as being works of empowerment for white supremacy? I think not!

There are a wide range of African-American artists who have given their creative energy to progressive images of identity that empower the descendents of the antebellum South. Even though Walker is exercising her "American Dream" of the First Amendment through her own visual language, one has only to examine the ingredients to see the content. If a can has been labeled as "pears," then we expect the dominant ingredient to be "pears." When Walker's content was discussed by Jasmil Raymond, the Walker Art Center's Assistant Curator, she said that those who challenge Walker's visual language can have our "private opinion" seeming to suggest that public opinion was insufficient.³ The Center has provided an opportunity on their website to educate the public, claiming it is the viewer's right to have an individual experience, yet this excerpt from the website appears to contradict this:

However, a work's message or significance is not limited only to the artist's intention. As viewers, our own experiences, associations, feelings, and stories become vital aspects in finding meaning in a work of art.⁴

Open dialogue is one of the most exciting experiences in the art community, and this is grounded in the idea of "public opinion" not "private opinion." Raymond, and others, believe this work is important mainly because it encourages people to talk about racism and sexism, but I believe this discussion is diverting us from the central issues: white supremacy and empowerment. For example, if one person shot another and claimed it was okay, simply because it has people discussing crime, this is madness at its finest. The empowerment of white supremacy happens through ideas and images used to mold minds through education which has occurred since the founding of the United States of America.

Walker was quoted in *arts international* magazine as being deeply moved by her father's support for this freedom of expression: "Not only did [my dad] defend my right to use the imagery that I want to use, he said he considered it a right that he and his generation had fought to give me, it was pretty damn nice of him."⁵ Her father's experience is common to many African-American art

professors. We have been grounded in the philosophy of progressive maneuvering through direct and indirect racist and institutional racism in America's academic institutions. Actually, her father's generation fought against the stereotypical images, sexual exploitations, and social degradation forced upon them, and those generations that followed. His generation is still fighting the "Willie Lynch mentality," in which the slave mentality is such a large part of the "nigger's" subconscious thinking that "niggers" will self-impose the slave mentality upon themselves and others; thereby maintaining the slave mentality when chattel slavery is no longer an institution.⁶ One perfect example of this is Walker's *Negress Notes (Brown Follies)* featured in John Thornton's online video titled, "Color Theory 8, A Shocking Negress."⁷ The image is of two White adult figures (male and female) facing each other, and nude down to their socks. They raise their drinking glasses in celebration of what? There is a little Black girl, with child-like bows on the tips of her braids, bridged between the figures and held up by the man's penis in her mouth and on the other end, by the pressure of the woman's pelvis, or some unknown object penetrating the little girl's anus. Who is empowered by this image? Walker is celebrating the empowerment of White Supremacy. What happens when African-American free-thinkers exercise their freedom of speech in the spirit of public opinion? They will be unquestionably empowering all people beyond the reason of just having a dialogue to justify a diluted version of African-American history. Walker has become "that" old story in which African-American history can be indirectly exploited by the mainstream, and directly by some African-Americans to whom scars seem to be healed only by the bandage of acceptability. Are these beautiful design silhouettes imitations of sexual exploration already exhausted by various art industries? Are these silhouettes of a more personal experience, not an African-American experience? What are we really looking at?

David D'Arcy, in his article entitled, "Kara Walker on Hurricanes, Heroes, and Villains: the eyes of the storm" refers to some of Walker's work as:

... a familiar faux-nostalgic whimsy to her graceful master-slave pairings, even to images of Southern cavaliers beating or coupling with clownish black victims, with the plantation aplomb that Walker's work always seems to be lampooning. But there's also fatalism in the elegant cutouts. Dead black caricatures are still dead, and still black.⁸

This describes not an empowerment of Blacks, but an empowerment of white supremacy, like the definition of black and white in the dictionary. If our children, Black or White, are being educated by looking up words in the dictionary, then what happens to the mind-set of those children who read the following definitions from the dictionary: dirty, soiled (hands black with grime), absence of light, sinister or evil, wicked (a black deed), discredit (got a black mark for being late), supernatural and especially the devil (black magic), very sad, gloomy, or calamitous (black despair) characterized by hostility or angry

discontent.⁹ [these definitions are listed in most dictionaries for the *adjective* black. Also, included is "member of a dark-skinned people: Negro."]

Albert C. Barnes wrote in his essay, "Negro Art and Ameica in 1925:

The most important element to be considered is the psychological complexion of the Negro as he inherited it from his primitive ancestors and which he maintains to this day.

The outstanding characteristics are his tremendous emotional endowment, his luxuriant and free imagination and a truly great power of individual expression. He has in superlative measure that fire and light which, coming from within, bathes his whole world, colors his images and impels him to expression.

Though Barnes, a White man who collected the fine arts from around the world, spoke of "Negro" art in the frame of "primitivism," as was typical of the early 20th century, he was willing to become a committed supporter of African-American art and its use for educating the public as is evidenced in his selection of a historically Black College, Lincoln University, as the governing power for the Barnes Foundation. Barnes' actions reflected the "New Negro Movement" during the Harlem Renaissance, with its discovery of self-identity for African-Americans. It appears we are continuing to look for a model in the 21st century that places the focus on achievements, in and out of our captivity during the antebellum South. The "New Negro Movement" challenged the idea of primitivism as associated with creative expressionism: we are still faced with the celebration of outsiders encouraging us to celebrate 21st century primitivism as an art form, both in content and context, under the influence of the Willie Lynch mentality. Though Barnes has spoken to the deep emotional creative response that "bathes [negro artists'] whole world;" in essence, it is as true today as it was in the 1920s.

Holland Cotter, in a *New York Times* review in 2007, insultingly compared Jacob Lawrence and Kara Walker's works, while ignoring Walker's narrative empowerment of white supremacy as opposed to Lawrence's narrative empowerment of African-Americans. I cannot help but think of Michael Thelwell's essay, "Mr. William Styron and the Reverend Turner," where Thelwell points out how one can create work in the name of history and art and fall short of empowering the very people it affects the most. Walker's inherited gift of expression was not used to challenge white supremacy but to empower it; one of many examples is "Successes" (1998). This image digs into the heart of empowering White Supremacy, by feeding into the idea that African-Americans are not human, they are animal.

Walker has created a man dressed in colonial attire with feet that are goat-like or beastly. The man is leaning over a nude bent-over Black woman with his penis in her mouth and Walker has given the Black woman a tail! This clearly demonstrated the beastly appetite for power over the Black female through sexual acts; but in addition to this, the historical racist idea that "Negroes are

descendents of monkeys" is highlighted in Walker's visual suggestion of the man's penis traveling through the woman's body and coming out of her anus like a monkey's tail. Celebrating 21st century primitivism. Walker's work is informed by her own memories of how poorly her father was treated by his white colleagues, while her own personal experience and research of the antebellum South somehow crossed paths, and created an artist speaking to today's audience, using images of the past. You do not know what it was to experience a part of history you did not live, states Walker. Yet, she creates works not about social issues coming from her personal experience, but hides behind historical images that miss the target and feeds the vested interest of those comfortable with being empowered. I find Walker's process of using cutouts to be an excellent example of profoundness born out of simplicity; her content should promote healing. But is it Walker who needs healing—or all of us? If a diagnosis of post traumatic stress disorder is needed for veterans, then what about some of us who are still seeking a diagnosis of post traumatic stress disorder associated with slavery, Jim Crow, and institutional racism which Walker has experienced or is experiencing? Despite one's viewpoint, which we all have a constitutional right to express, what is undeniable is our right to critique Walker's images and what they represent. I am reminded again of Thelwell who states that ". . . Mr. Styron's book is being read as a kind of super historical novel by a public seeking what it seeks in all of its reading, the shock of mildly pleasurable outrage and, incidentally, information and insight." In the same light, Walker's work is being read as "super historical" content by affluent members of the mainstream art community who seek out creative images which provide the "shock of mildly pleasurable outrage and, incidentally, information and insight."

I am not interested in celebrating the stereotypical aesthetics of Denzel Washington, Halle Berry, or Kara Walker. I am not willing to sacrifice the empowerment of African-Americans, or any people, at the price of celebrating stereotypes that empower Whites in American society. I am not interested in exploiting the serious history of African-Americans for selfish gain. I cannot respect any artist who is willing to do so. I believe we must direct a warning to our society about the psychological damage done by empowering white supremacy through African-American art. I am interested in how our generation, and those to follow, are empowered beyond the Willie Lynch mentality of art making.

Najjar Abdul-Musawwir

¹ O, The Oprah Magazine, November 2008, p. 227

- ² The capitalizing of Black and White is used to reference a name of a people, otherwise, it is lower case.
- ³ Website: video from Minnesota_stories.blip.tv, Walker After Hours: Kara Walker
- ⁴ This website is an educational resource developed in conjunction with the Walker Art Center exhibition Kara Walker: the first full-scale U.S. museum survey of her work.
- ⁵ Ai performance for the planet, Kara Walker recent work, Spring 2002, p. 75
- ⁶ William Lynch, a White slave owner, who reportedly made the speech on the banks of the James River in 1712. Lynch was a British slave owner in the West Indies who came to the United States to tell American slave owners how to keep their slaves under control. The term "lynching" is derived from Lynch's name.
<http://www.uky.edu/StudentOrgs/AWARE/archives/lynch.html>
- ⁷ Simply use Google search and type in Color Theory 8, A Shocking Negress
- ⁸ Modern Painters, International Arts and Culture, April 2006, p. 56
<http://www.merriam-webster.com/>
- ¹⁰ Dodie Kazanjian is an author several books on the visual arts, and has interviewed many representative of the art world. He is also a writer for Vogue, and House and Garden magazines. His works are in the Archives of American Art at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C.
- ¹¹ Vogue. New York: May 2005. Vol. 195, Issue 5, p. 240
- ¹² The Root.com/kara walker
- ¹³ Dr. Albert C. Barnes (1872 _ 1951) empowered Lincoln University to promote and advancement Barnes Foundation, a non-profit educational institution in 1922, education of appreciation of fine art and horticulture.
- ¹⁴ New Negro Movement, edited by Dr. Alain Locke, 1925, p. 19
- ¹⁵ Michael Thelwell, Duties, Pleasures, and Conflicts: Essays in Struggle, The University of Massachusetts Press, 1987, p.170
- ¹⁶ Ai performance for the planet, Kara Walker recent work, Spring 2002, p. 70
- ¹⁷ Michael Thelwell, Duties, Pleasures, and Conflicts: Essays in Struggle, The University of Massachusetts Press, 1987, p.171

KARA WALKER'S MESSAGE

Kara Walker's work has its roots in minstrelsy. At one time the Germans, the Irish, the Jews, the Italians and the Blacks all were mocked by Americans and the British. Gradually, over time, all the minorities except the African Americans were able to suppress the racists' jokes and mockery.

To gain perspective on Walker's art, ask yourself this question:

Can you imagine a Jew exhibiting a Jew in Auschwitz fucking a dog?

Or an Italian in silhouette sucking a Nazi's dick?

The question is not whether it happened, but rather why should we publicly remind the world of minstrel mockery of our own people, even if we're well-paid to do it. While our black leaders demand of us to stop using the "N" word, Walker's art tells the world:

"See, we were and are Niggers, and we're not ashamed of it."

Our struggle has been too hard and too long to get Obama elected to the Presidency to denigrate our images now."

—Camille Billops

WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT KARA WALKER'S WORK?

In response to the question, what do you think about Kara Walkers Work?

I had to pause and take a minute to think about the question. My first response was:

Her works are not an exhibition that I would want children to see. Her cute storybook cut-out characters do indeed tell a Grim Tale that does not include any redeeming fairies.

I walked away from both exhibitions, (especially the one at the Whitney Museum because there was gallery after gallery of vile visual imagery), feeling that I had been exposed to a deadly toxin from which I needed to leave right away and find some spiritual mind-cleaning antidote to insure that I would not be infected for life.

That said, I did spend some time reading a few of the many reviews and articles on Ms. Walker and her work. I suspect that the reams of articles and reviews are due to the level of money and energy that has been invested in mounting, exhibiting and promoting this artist's works which have been acclaimed as worthy of receiving the prestigious McArthur Genius Award.

My personal idea of how this notion of genius was perceived as such is that the committee members, (of course I have no idea who these individuals might be), whom I would bet are at least 90 to 95% wealthy and/or well-placed and influential Whites who determine taste and cultural relevance. I can envision the images being projected onto a huge screen and everyone in the room sucking in his/her breath! Then followed by a lengthy discussion about how bravely this young artist attempts to expose the ugliest underbelly of the 300 years of slavery in America. It was then determined that this bravery and fearlessness should indeed be recognized, rewarded and shared with the American public on a grand scale, to insure that the greater graphic clarity of the subject be more widely exhibited. These atrocities and the high level of miscegenation have already been well documented and made evident through the very makeup of the Afro-American population.

On the other hand, I would venture to say that how Ms. Walker came to these most controversial and disturbing works, have a lot more to do with her own personal experiences. Her formative years, until her adolescence, were spent in Stockton, California, where race for her was not a conscious issue. But

then her family moved to Atlanta, Georgia, where "Being a Black girl (in the South) felt like it was a bad thing to be." This fact was stated in her own words in a description of an unfortunate relationship with a white lover?/sex partner? that she describes as 'one of the dark millstones in her life'—"I learned a lot during that time, but all of it crouched in silence and a deep sense of terror."

The fact that the horror of slavery can be equated with living with terror helps to bring Ms. Walker's work into focus. Her statement also gives us some insights into what has helped to inform her work.

My hope is that Ms. Walker's demons have been purged and that she will go forward with her considerable talent to provide her audience with more uplifting, life-empowering insights and images that I would be happy to visit and share with young people. Our world needs healing which can only come from positive thoughts which can be realized. The glorification of negative thoughts only serves to keep us wallowing in shame, self-hatred, and the placing of blame. To live in yesterday prevents us from learning how to live in the now.

Ms Walker is in a unique position to focus on how her positive passions might be expressed. She is still young and I look forward to what might come forth once her mind has been unshackled.

—Betty Blayton

These comments were made in response to Kara Walker's Exhibitions in New York held at the Studio Museum in Harlem and the Whitney Museum of American Art.

TIME BRING ABOUT A CHANGE

PART ONE

*Somebody started a rumor that socializing with Blacks could be fun,
So pretty soon as the word got around,
Every cocktail party had...one.*

—Lyrics from "Time Brings About a Change" by Micki Grant
From the Broadway musical *Don't Bother Me, I Can't Cope*

During the spring of 1999, staff at the Detroit Institute of the Arts began planning a summer exhibition of women printmakers drawn solely from the museum's permanent collection. The exhibition, *Where the Girls Are: Prints by Women from the DIA's Collection*, featured the work of many women artists including Kara Walker. The curatorial department planned the exhibition to feature a large group of female print makers—the show would feature both historic and contemporary prints. The 1995 Walker print, *A Means to an End: A Shadow Drama in Five Acts*, had just been acquired through purchase by the museum, and was selected for the exhibition checklist. The large image depicted a slave woman suckling a child; a woman running using heads as stepping-stones; and a man choking a girl child. To the surprise of the exhibition organizers (the museum's curatorial and education departments), the African American community in Detroit asked that the piece be removed from the show. To my surprise, how were the organizers of this exhibition taken aback by the reaction? Were we not in the City of Detroit?

Detroit, Michigan is home one of the most dynamic collecting communities of art by African American artists in the country. The art community is composed of a rich comradery between artists, art lovers, and collectors. Collectors acknowledge their role as supporters of African American visual culture and thoroughly understand the role of the arts as a vital and important part of African American material culture. This level of engagement, encouragement, support, and dialogue has developed over a six-decade period beginning in the mid-1940s. In fact artist Larry Walker, Kara's father, earned his undergraduate degree from Wayne State University in the late-1950s as this rich community was coming into its own.

'Detroit art advocates travel all over the nation and report back what's happening at major museums—the Whitney Museum of American Art, the National Gallery, the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, the Art Institute of Chicago, the High Museum, etc. How many African Americans can one approach at a non-descript event and discuss the latest articles in *ARTnews*, *Art in America*, or *Art Forum*? After hearing the following queries while standing in line at the public library, "Girrrrrll, did you see that long article on Joseph Beuys's latest work in this month's issue of *Art in America*? What'd you think," one needed to be prepared with intelligent and engaging answer—period. As the late Margaret Ann Montgomery shared with me, "Artists and art historians coming to Detroit to lecture need to be prepared and ready because we here in Detroit have done our reading and research. We have checked all the footnotes." Detroit Public School teachers collect fine art and libraries to support their collections. The level of visual art education and sophistication found in Detroit's African American community is unmatched in most major American cities.

In the late 1950s, this art community, in collaboration with the DIA, started a museum auxiliary group called the Friends of the African Galleries to support the African galleries and acquisitions of African art for the museum's permanent collection. In later years, the auxiliary expanded its focus to include 19th and 20th century art produced by African Americans. Today the Friends of African and African American Art (FAAA) are close to celebrating their 50th anniversary and, through 45 years of annual fundraising, are now designated as a major benefactor to the museum.

Given FAAA's long relationship with the museum, many members were aware of the museum's African American permanent collection holdings. Weeks before the exhibition opening, several FAAA members voiced their concerns with the museum's administration and questioned the choice of Walker's work in the exhibition and, by extension, the permanent collection. FAAA members were aware that the museum has not acquired a print by African American woman artist since the mid-1940s and there was a major deficit in the museum's print collection—and the missing were called: Emma Amos, Camille Billops, Vivian Browne, Margaret Burroughs, Nanette Carter, Elizabeth Catlett, Robin Holder, Margo Humphrey, Lois M. Jones, Samella Lewis, E.J. Montgomery, Norma Morgan, Howardena Pindell, Adrian Piper, Betye Saar, Clarissa Sligh, Renee Stout, Ruth G. Waddy, Mildred Thompson, Shirley Woodson-Reid, etc., etc.

The collecting community and African American artists questioned from a curatorial perspective, how did we get to Kara Walker? "Where was the historical precedent?" "How do we get to such a volatile and painful image when there is no context for it?" "How do we place Walker's work in the greater framework of African American women printmakers when 50 years of art production is non-existent in the permanent collection?" "Why is this artist the choice of the art

world and considered so “important” and well funded all of a sudden?” “There are so many other artists who deserve the critical attention and presentation. Why this?” “Given the image, is this what is invited to the party?”

Many people associated with the museum felt that the print needed to be removed from the exhibition. The organizing staff fought to maintain the original exhibition checklist and offered to add lengthy didactic panels to aid in the interpretation the image for museum audiences. In planning the exhibition, the museum staff failed to understand that many in their audience were visually literate and well-read about the current art events and movements, so a well-prepared didactic was not the solution to this larger problem. Walker’s print, *A Means to an End*, spoke clearly and directly to the audience about its content—there were no hidden messages. The image, its accession into the museum’s collection, and arrogance of the museum staff attempting to discuss fine art over the heads of African Americans were all offensive. The presence of the print also spoke to the curatorial staff’s non-relationship with its immediate audience—auxiliary group, the Friends of African and African American Art.

Ultimately, Walker’s print was not included in the exhibition. Maurice D. Parrish, the museum’s interim director told *ARTnews* in September 1999, “We believe that it is our responsibility to present controversial art in a way that helps our visitors to understand the work and the artist’s intent. In this instance, we determined that we could not present the work with the appropriate didactic material. Because we were concerned that we could not present it properly, we decided to exclude that piece from this particular exhibition.”

*Now all the good white folks have gone and left town
Because it was not fun anymore.
When those fun colored folks left the cocktail party
and bought the house next door,*

—Lyrics from “Time Brings About a Change” by Micki Grant From the Broadway musical *Don’t Bother Me, I Can’t Cope*

PART TWO

I do not own a television. I have not had one for 15 years. My primary reason for killing the television was that I no longer wanted to hear and see the violent, incessant “stream” of racist and sexist messages flowing into my private space, my home. As a young person growing up in Los Angeles, I had several peers who were young actors and remember them working hard, while in school, for upcoming auditions to land lead roles in Hollywood’s television and film industry. I recall clearly one friend who was cast as a young teen in a serious TV drama about a Black single-parent (father) family coping with raising his family on limited resources. The series lasted only a couple of weeks and was canceled

permanently. My actor friend was disappointed and reported to me that America was not ready to see the work of serious Black actors. I understood his message and was saddened by the lesson I had to learn then as a young teen coming of age in the years after the Civil Right movement. In the words of song writer Gil Scott-Heron, Malcolm and Martin were killed and all we got was Superfly and Shaft. The re-mixed 19th century "Zip Coon" images for 20th century audiences were called J.J. Walker and George Jefferson. These blackfaces, along with their long historical and cultural roots, were mainstay of TV and film culture during my teen years.

Through that childhood experience and others, I developed a distaste for the form of American entertainment as illustrated in the character of the minstrel. I rejected all of its forms—print, film, and music. As I grew older, I learned that minstrel performance was (and is) an important tradition in American performance art and is also popular overseas in Asia and Europe. As we know, the stereotypes embodied in the main characters of blackface minstrels played a significant role solidifying and proliferating racist images, attitudes and perceptions worldwide. As artist Mark Steven Greenfield has so eloquently outlined about the minstrel image in his catalogue essay, "Blackatcha: Behind the Grease Paint and Burnt Cork":

"These images are intensely powerful in both their literal statements and in their ability to allow viewers to create a context through the bias of their own associations. Generations of African American have suffered grievous injuries at the hands of people whose livelihood was derived from creating and reinforcing stereotypes through blackface minstrelsy. The creation of a stereotype was an essential element in maintaining white Americans' illusion of superiority. It characterized African American as buffoons and tricksters, as inherently lazy and immoral, and as perennial children who were dependent on the paternalism of our "masters" for survival."

Over the last 125 years these pervasive negative images have changed slightly, but their core message and intent is the same. The late filmmaker Marlon Riggs illustrated this beautifully in his feature length work *Color Adjustment*. Aunt Jemina now wears pearls and no longer a head rag, but subliminally the message is still transmitted. If the images did not move product off the shelf, the companies would have pulled all the brown-faced labels off the jars long time ago. Minstrel engagement and entertainment sells big! Two years ago in Atlanta, Georgia, two films, Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* and the Wayans brothers' *White Chicks*, opened the same weekend here in the Metro area. *White Chicks* out-grossed Michael Moore's film opening weekend. Who would have thought? Who would want to see a young, bright, and responsible African American military officer in *Fahrenheit* explain his reasons for not supporting the Iraq War? No, that's not entertainment. Now, two Black men in whiteface minstrel are far more entertaining, as the actors play to a deep-seeded psychosis

that is as old as this nation. As *White Chicks* raked in large profits, I didn't hear conversations questioning the behavior of the viewing audience with its embrace (and financial support) for the film. As a colleague asked me, "What's your problem? It's just a movie"

How does Kara Walker fit into this for me? I simply view her work as art world minstrel performance. I have never understood her work because I see the images as quite shallow and non-dimensional. (Yes, the image is of a man choking a child . . . and your point is?) I have not been satisfied with an answer. I have approached the work repeatedly with an open mind and heart as I read and re-read the reviews, catalogue essays, and gallery didactic labels. But yet, I seem to come away from the material with a different take on the interpretation than has been presented by so many art critics, curators and educators. I feel like the young person in the story of the Emperor's new clothes who yells out after the Emperor makes his grand appearance in his "new" illustrious attire, "But he has nothing on!" For me, as a visual person, there is no substance to the caricatures Ms. Walker creates and I view her work as 21st century re-cycled minstrel buffoonery. This is nothing new and unfortunately these images will be reconstituted over-and-over again for years to come, as curators, filmmakers, and critics feast in a frenzy over something they seem never to get enough of.

Ms. Walker has learned well to entertain her audiences with a long legacy of eschewed perceptions of American history and subconscious thoughts of the perceived "other" by the majority. If the vile and volatile images, which she has a right to produce, are her point of departure, then where do we go from here conceptually? If Ms. Walker decided to express her "Negress" narrative in an abstract framework, would she still be the celebrated art world wonder and "genius" who has been groomed to become the standard to which all other visual artists are measured? (As in the case with some of my actor friends who are asked to demonstrate an "Eddie Murphy" type for auditions for roles in major films.)

Yes—there is the artist and what she says about her artistic intent and direction. However, the commercial and exhibition success of work she produces speaks more to the mental framework of her supporting cast than to her vision as an artist. Americans (and others) seem to love a "genuine" minstrel show especially if it is produced by a "genuine" one herself.

As with television, I have a choice with the presence of certain kinds of visual information in my life; therefore, I have a choice as to what galleries and museums I choose to patronize and support. I don't find minstrel performance entertaining, so if a work reads that way for me, I don't buy, view it, or support it—plain and simple. My Los Angeles community raised me to think critically about visual images and approach all viewing from as many vantage points as possible. To that extent, there are far too many interesting and engaging works of art out there for me to pour my eyes over and enjoy!

Note: Understanding the need to provide a historical perspective of art produced by African Americans and acknowledging the city's rich legacy, the Detroit Institute of Arts, in 2000, established the General Motors Center for African American Art, which represents one of the first curatorial departments in the country, dedicated solely to the art of African Americans at any major art museum.

Smile. I love Detroit.

—Camille Ann Brewer

L'EFFET DE RÉEL: SHOWING (AND TELLING) KARA WALKER

Since Kara Walker came to prominence in 1997 with her exhibition at The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago (my alma mater), I have heard a slew of defenses of her art that are as vehement as they are contradictory: Her work is a re-appropriation of racist imagery; her work is not about stereotype at all; her work is ironic not realistic, etc. Those who question her over-exposure are frequently accused of wanting to silence or censor her (as if they had the means or even the will to do so!); or they are accused of being "old," of belonging to a generation that "doesn't get it." In private, one-on-one conversations that I have had about the artist, I have even been told that, typically, fairer-skinned blacks are the most resistant to her art (the implication being that they need to defend "blackness" more rigorously because they are somehow "inauthentically black"). Yes, it gets that crazy.

In all the back-and-forth about Kara Walker, something is missing in the discussion about meaning, artistic intent, audience reception, and the long-term effects of her imagery. Given Walker's high visibility (and over-representation, I would add) both nationally and internationally in museums, galleries, biennials, etc., this absented element in the discourse surrounding her work is typical and disturbing and insupportable. I am speaking, of course, about the public programs generated at the various venues, which serve to reflect how curators in conjunction with their educational arms understand the work and which serve to mediate between the work and the public. I offer you one example.

São Paulo Biennial, March 23 - June 2, 2002

In 2002, Professor Robert Hobbs chose Walker to represent the United States at the São Paulo Biennial. Hobbs teaches art history at Virginia Commonwealth University, where he holds the Rhoda Thalhimer Chair in Art History. According to Hobbs, Walker first came to his attention in 1995 when he and his wife saw her show *The High and Soft Laughter of the Nigger Wenches At Night*, (Wooster Gardens/Brent Sikkema, New York City, April 6–May 6, 1995). Her nomination to represent the United States in Brazil was unanimously approved by a national committee of curators and museum directors organized by Arts International in New York.

According to Hobbs, "Kara's real subject is ideology," which he distinguishes from the re-appropriation of stereotyped images employed by Betye Saar's

"generation" (the 1960s). I pull this out of his full statement to reinforce the false generational divide that supporters of Walker invent to dismiss "the old heads" who object to Walker's representative status. Hobbs gives his own potted history that unproblematically un-weaves civil rights from what he calls "ideological stereotyping" as if they can exist separated from one another. Below is the full quotation:

In my estimation, Kara's real subject is ideology. At the end of the 1960s many civil rights battles seemed to have been won. Then a second phase of securing and enforcing equal opportunity through elected black officials ensued. Today the war over ideological stereotyping still remains to be fought. People from that 1960s generation, like Betye Saar, wanted to empower stereotypes by lifting them up, enlisting them as soldiers instead of acknowledging their negative power and ineffectiveness in achieving change. Kara Walker wants to set racist stereotypes loose in the world so that we can see the type of cultural insanity or paranoia behind them. In Walker's case these ideological constraints take the form of historical romances that perpetuate racist, Old South, and antebellum stereotypes.¹

Hobbs defines "ideology," as that which "ratifies prejudices as natural, objective, and real."² Like Walker, whose power is constructed as passive and revelatory (turning stereotypes "loose in the world" so that "we can see behind them"), ideology is constructed by Hobbs as passive, reflective, and after the fact of racial prejudice. I would argue that Ideology is not passive and it is not after-the-fact of prejudice. Historian Barbara J. Fields describes ideology as "the descriptive vocabulary of day-to-day existence, through which people make rough sense of the social reality that they live and create from day to day. It is the language of consciousness that suits the particular way in which people deal with their fellows. . . . As such, ideologies are not delusions but real, as real as the social relations for which they stand."³ The premise of her argument is that race itself is an ideology. "If race lives on today," she contends, "it does not live because we have inherited it from our forbears of the seventeenth century or the eighteenth or nineteenth, but because we continue to create it today."⁴ Racial ideology and slavery are still active and actively conspiring in the world; but what does it mean for Hobbs/Walker to pose them as problems of the past that linger only as echoes today?

What, really, does Kara Walker's work have to do with the historical and contemporary fact of enslavement?

Hobbs considers the war for social justice to have been won and that the only war left to be fought is "the war over ideological stereotyping." By untangling ideology (which Fields describes as "a distillate of experience"⁵) from experience itself, by detaching it from ongoing injustices, by refusing to acknowledge social injustice, he has rendered ideology truly purposeless. He explicitly states that

Saar's "problem" and other artists like her (old and who don't get it) was that they chose to forge an alliance with stereotypes "instead of acknowledging their negative power and ineffectiveness in achieving change." By implication, Walker gets it "right," in that she acknowledges / celebrates stereotypes' "*negative power and ineffectiveness* in achieving change." (Emphasis mine.) Inadvertently, he does reveal what I would describe as the malicious impotence (negative power and ineffectiveness) of Walker's endeavor. Because he renders Ideology separate from action and purpose, he frees Walker from the consequences of "creating and verifying in social life"⁶ racism itself.

No discussion of Kara Walker can happen without mention of "the controversy." After Hobbs describes the three pieces exhibited at the Biennial, Hobbs is then asked by the interviewer to address the controversies that surround Walker's work. In a statement that is breathlessly out of touch, Hobbs declares, "The controversy about Kara's work is pretty much over in the United States." He bases this assertion on conversations with certain unnamed "native informants" (my term) within the African American community. "Certain prominent African Americans tell me they recognize that different approaches to the question of race exist, and they're content now to leave these opposing approaches alone. They're philosophical about the issue of slavery. Nonetheless, it hurt when Kara brought it up. But she wants to produce work controversial enough to make even her uneasy. That's remarkable!" Where to begin? How to begin to untangle the collapse of race and slavery and the unhinging of ideology from race? How to begin to understand how Hobbs understands and privileges what he thinks he heard from "certain prominent African-Americans" who have learned to be "philosophical about the issue of slavery"? What does he think that Kara Walker has "taught" us about "recogniz[ing] opposing approaches to the question of race"; about being "content now to leave these opposing approaches alone" [SHUT UP ABOUT IT!]; about being "philosophical about the issue of slavery"?

Why is that African Americans must re-confirm for him "the question of race"? Why is it their responsibility to bear the burden of race alone, to be its interpreters, its authorities even as they bow to Hobbs/ Walker's greater authority by admitting to the complexity of race? As Fields writes, race was invented as the explanation for slavery in a country that prided itself on equality and social justice. "It was not Afro-Americans," she argues, "who needed a racial explanation; it was not they who invented themselves as a race. Euro-Americans resolved the contradictions between slavery and liberty by defining Afro-Americans as a race; Afro-Americans resolved the contradiction more straightforwardly by calling for the abolition of slavery . . . Afro-Americans understood the reason for their enslavement to be, as Frederick Douglass put it, 'not *color*, but *crime*'."⁷ And yet, Hobbs/ Walker would have us believe that African Americans are the inventors of race; that it is African Americans who need it. The next question

and answer illustrates this idea perfectly. How, the interviewer asks, does one of Walker's pieces invoke the argument that certain prominent African Americans recognize that different approaches to the question of race exist, and they're content now to leave these opposing approaches alone? Hobbs finds his answer in the embodiment of what he terms "white racism"—blackface collectibles—and the fact that "blackface collectibles have been so eagerly sought after by upwardly mobile African Americans [no hyphenation for this particular invocation of black people]."⁸

Oh, wow, in other words the "talented-tenth" among us (prominent and upwardly mobile) have been busily pursuing and purchasing the commodified form of white racism and thereby ratify Walker's malicious impotence! But those of us who invest in white racism are not alone. According to Hobbs, "Kara collects this material. Then she *distances herself from it* through an assumed pseudonymous persona—K.E.D. Walker or Miss Kara Elizabeth Walker that enables her to describe herself as a *freed slave*." (Emphasis mine.) What does that mean? Does it mean that, as the embodiment of White Racism, the artist distances herself by describing herself as a Freed Slave? Hobbs explains, "This strategy gives her an historical nexus and a distinct perspective from which to examine this material. I think this ploy greatly empowers her. It gives her a 'shadow' persona through which to produce the shadows—silhouettes—in her work. Shadows, as we all know, result from light focused on objects. The 'light' in Kara's work is metaphoric; it represents the prejudicial values of mainstream society, so that her silhouettes or shadows are the *indirect reflections of society's projections*. It's ideology that has become history." (Emphasis mine.) Note how Hobbs reinforces the idea that Walker's work is wielded passively, that she must become the work in order to produce it. And regarding his last statement, that "it's ideology that has become history," what does it mean to suggest that the ratification of prejudice as natural, objective, and real is now the function of history?

At this point, a second interviewer enters the conversation and asks Hobbs about Brazil's discomfort with its unacknowledged race problem and how this influenced Hobbs's thinking about the U.S. pavilion. Not surprisingly, Hobbs finds his answers in blackface collectibles and in educated, upwardly mobile blacks. "I'd heard that there were no blackface collectibles in Brazil. However, a quick trip to a local flea market in Rio disproved that claim. So, while people tend to discuss Kara's work, which plays with the racism giving rise to these collectibles, as particular to the southern United States, it is more accurate to think of it as international—particularly since blackface collectibles are also plentiful in parts of Europe." Even as blackface collectibles become the "proof" of racial ideology, they are also the bad smell that lingers like a fart in an empty elevator that permeates Walker's exhibitions. (I appeal to the editors of this volume to leave that last sentence in—why should we exhibit "decorum" in language when Walker's work does not exhibit "visual decorum"? Why can't I

be as raw as she? ((I further entreat the editors to leave my parenthetical questions in the body of the text, including this one))).

After hunting down Brazil's blackface collectibles/ complicity in racial ideology, Hobbs says that "second, we obtained statistics from the U.S. Embassy in Brazil showing that very few Afro-Brazilians are college-educated and upwardly mobile—though I noticed a disproportionately high number of them visiting Brazilian art museums so I wonder if the statistics are up to date?" The correlation that Hobbs makes between class and "Culture" need not be dwelled upon, except to say that he treats it as a universal—what if poor (black) people in Brazil did visit art museums and not just work in them as they do in the U.S.? However, it is actually Hobbs's next statement and the rationale behind it that makes me shudder and that brings me to the title of this essay—*L'Effet de Réel*. After wondering if the statistics were up to date, Hobbs offers, "We'll employ a mixture of students, including a number of Afro-Brazilians to give tours. This approach builds on Monticello's efforts to find convincing voices for discussing Sally Hemmings' relation to Jefferson. People have said that the sexual references in Kara Walker's art will probably not be controversial in Brazil. We would like people to come to terms with the radical content of her work and not take the shortcut of falling for some of the controversies that developed in the States."¹⁰ Imagine! As international audiences trooped through the titillating display, they had the opportunity to look from Walker's silhouettes to Afro-Brazilian embodiments of white racism—mutually reinforcing and inflecting one another, these teens, for money, become part of the display—its speaking component. They are "the convincing voices" that provide "the reality effect" first noted by Roland Barthes and developed by Linda Nochlin in her essay "The Imaginary Orient." "Such details," Nochlin writes, "supposedly there to denote the real directly, are actually there simply to signify its presence in the work as a whole. As Barthes points out, the major function of gratuitous, accurate details like these is to announce 'we are the real.' They are signifiers of the category of the real, there to give credibility to the 'realness' of the work as a whole, to authenticate the total visual field as a simple, artless reflection. . . ."¹¹

Let me add one last comment on what Hobbs had to say about what was going to happen in São Paulo as opposed to what had already happened in the U.S.: his hope that Brazil would have a different reaction to Walker's work was informative. The idea that those in the U.S. who objected to Walker's work had been hoodwinked, bamboozled, or simply intellectually lazy because they took "the shortcut of falling for some of the controversies" reveals the impossibility of the divide in discourse surrounding not just Walker's art, but also the question of race and ideology and history. *L'Effet de Réel*, or what I term "authenticating gestures," permeates Walker exhibitions.¹² Even as people argue over whether her work is about stereotype or not, about irony or not, what remains in a nation that has yet to officially acknowledge that slavery happened here and continues

to happen throughout the world is that Walker's work becomes the memory of that ideology that now masquerades as history. Her work is active in the world in the same way that memory itself is active. As Mieke Bal notes, "Memory is an act of 'vision' of the past but, as an act, situated in the present of the memory. It is often a narrative act: loose elements come to cohere into a story, so that they can be remembered and eventually told."¹³

What, really, does Kara Walker's work have to do with the historical and contemporary fact of enslavement?

Nothing. She just yells "NIGGER!" in a crowded theater, and rather than stampeding out, we are forced to sit and listen and burn.

— Kirsten Pai Buick

1 Charles Reeve, "Kara Walker at the São Paulo Biennial: A Conversation with Robert Hobbs," *Art Papers Magazine* (March / April 2002): 12.

2 Reeve, 13.

3 Barbara J. Fields, "Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States of America," *NLR* I/181 (May-June 1990): 110.

4 Fields, 117.

5 Fields, 112.

6 As Fields writes, "An ideology must be constantly created and verified in social life; if it is not, it dies, even though it may seem to be safely embodied in a form that can be handed down." Fields, p. 112.

7 Fields, 114-115.

8 Reeve, "Kara Walker at the São Paulo Biennial," p. 13

9 Reeve, 13.

10 Reeve, 13

11 Linda Nochlin, "The Imaginary Orient," in *The Politics of Vision* (New York: Icon Editions, 1989), 38

12 As part of a Walker exhibition, typically, there will be a parade of black spoken word artists / lecturers who, like the Afro-Brazilian teenagers, give voice to her work. There will typically be lectures about slavery and post-colonialism, which give an academic gloss to her art (see the program for her show at the Whitney October 11, 2007 – February 3, 2008). At Williams College in 2003, they concluded her exhibition with a screening of "Gone With the Wind."

13 Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* 2nd edition (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), p. 147

HERE ARE MY THOUGHTS ON THE WORKS OF MS. WALKER

1. What is it we are looking at here?

Cartooning of rural southerners, white and black representations having to some extent a shamelessly good time. While it is clear that Northern white people do not see themselves in any of the depiction of the antebellum south. Nor do they feel any love for those Southern "Crackers." I feel this is certainly the reason Ms Walker's work is highly supported both in the media and the Art World.

Black artists see only the racist depiction of Negros, they feel outrage and protest, but it is the White Northern Press which defends her, perhaps it's not the Negro who is really important in the Works of Ms. Walker.

2. In a *New York Times* review of 2006, Roberta Smith writes:

"The candor with which Ms. Walker has explored America's seemingly insoluble knot of race, gender and sexuality can seem shockingly impartial. The problem here is not impartiality. It does not offend me that Kara Walker depicts black children with extra large lips or for that matter white people with extra long noses. Nor does it offend me that what her cartoon images are alluding to be doing (sexual or bestial or otherwise). . . ."

The problem here is that Ms. Smith makes reference to America's insoluble knot of race and gender—and many people make this mistake—it gives Ms. Walker's work a much higher platform of discussion than it deserves.

Ms. Walker is making fun of the Antebellum—so what. In the process she seems to also allude to a sexual fetish, which let's be clear, it's *Her's*—and she is not talking for all black people or white people in America. The other problem is that this work by Kara Walker travels the world as America's race, gender, sex problem, and people seem to fail to realize that this is one woman making fun of the Antebellum South of 1800, this work does not depict the root of America's problem, nor does it depict the root of race relations in America. If anything it is provocative in suggesting her own fetish may lie somewhere within the interpretation of her work.

—Gregory Coates

WALKER AND RACISM

That is indeed discouraging. And this is reason to fear. Walker and many artists like her belong to a generation that feels detached from the type of apartheid that informed and sustained American culture, politics, and social order for so many centuries. Besides the obvious, the most damaging element of any apartheid regime is the silencing of all voices except the few that it has approved. Walker's voice and approval exist at the expense of so many whose voices are deemed unworthy, unimportant, and irrelevant to the greater system. That voice (Walker's or anyone like her) is given legitimacy, not by consulting the Black (or Native American) community for advice and opinion, ideas and response, but by awarding it (the voice) an unparalleled market share in the capitalist system. Regardless of how damaging it is to the community it supposedly represents. When backed by those institutions of wealth and authority any response is seen as too late and silenced once again.

This is a good time to engage in the dialogue on racism in America in the 21st century as Obama put it front and center of the national debate during the 2008 presidential campaign. It has become more tangled and complex than ever as a new generation, who sees itself as too distant from slavery, Jim Crow, and other forms of race related problems, enters the discourse. One thing is for certain, however, artists should not be left out of the debate this time.

—Bob Dillworth

KARA WALKER: A NEGRESS ON A MISSION

As a writer, I have had the privilege of covering many subjects and personalities. I have a great deal of admiration for African and African American art, and the artists who are privileged with the God-given talents and abilities to create images that reach out to us. Otto Neals, Romare Bearden, Henry O. Tanner, Elizabeth Catlett, Varnett P. Honeywood, and Lois Mailou-Jones, are among some of my favorites. However, I must admit that this is my first exposure to an individual of Kara Walker's caliber.

Initially, it's was easy to see that her themes are primarily about people of African heritage, and very possibly designed to depict the plight of slavery and racism. To that end, I must say that the initial impact has left an incredibly indelible and unshakeable imprint on my mind.

Talk about shock and awe! Shock: because the images are quite disturbing and truly a shock to the senses. The sexual themes clearly interlaced with the master/slave images are not necessarily new, but depicted in such a banal fashion that I dare say has never been explored by any artist until Kara Walker. Awe, because I was left speechless, initially, upon my first exposure to her work. Not the kind of awe that one gets from a sense of beauty and capturing that comes through many expressions of art when our culture, struggle and triumph come together on a canvas in a way that reaches inward and touches your heart. But the kind of awe you might feel at the audacity, and perhaps venality with which we are depicted.

There is a sense of contempt from a seriously disturbed mentality to bring these images to life in such a graphic fashion and not be afraid (or concerned) of being considered a sociopath. This is truly not just protest art, though some have tried to claim it is. It's not "cultural art"—unless you're dealing with a culture of chaos, trauma, and confusion. It's like looking at a giant Rorschach Inkblot Test gone wild. For those in the art realm who may not be familiar with the great psychiatrist, Dr. Rorschach, the Ink Blot test he invented also utilized silhouettes, to plumb the depths of people with serious mental illnesses or emotional disturbances. The silhouettes would be presented to the person, and they would interpret them. Usually their interpretations were very negative, dark and disturbing. I dare say he would have had a field day with Ms. Walker!

One would have to definitely ask what could possibly have happened to Ms. Walker in her young life to display such disturbing images. One would also

have to admire the prodigious amount of talent it takes to bring these images to life (or is it maniacal frenzy?) and share it with the world. But most of us can't help but view it as a signal for help.

Genius? That she definitely is, in much the same way that Edgar Allen Poe would have been called a genius of the macabre; or Van Gogh was a genius in his day. The confluence of themes jump at you simultaneously: the horrors of post-latent and deeply rooted post-traumatic slavery issues vividly captured in the grotesque, and somewhat comical (acerbic?) figures, that combine to stir guilt or evoke catharsis, depending on who's doing the viewing.

Not everyone is able to bring their subconscious so graphically to the fore. The work is not only monumental in its undertaking, it's monumental in size, as well. The 85-foot cyclorama "Slavery, Slavery Presenting a GRAND AND LIVELIKE journey into picturesque southern slavery, or Life at Ol' Virginny's Hole (sketches from plantation life) see the peculiar institution as never before"—a rather lengthy title, but one that amply displays at once her intimate understanding of the socio-pathological impact of racism on both Blacks and Whites, literally jumps out and engulfs the viewer.

Her attempt to find humor in it misses the mark. It's much more cynical—a sad commentary on how deeply the pathology affects us. You are immersed, and when you emerge, you do so with a different comprehension of both the subject and the fact that Ms. Walker has been able to spring it on an unsuspecting world under the guise of art.

The deeper and more perplexing question is what drives her to create the works she does? A question she obviously attempted to attack when she created the semi-memoir "Do you like crème in your coffee, milk in your cocoa?" What struck me was the opening page which depicted sexually explicit groupings of both adults and infants laying head to end in the shape of a slave ship. The caption "Ship of Fools" was no doubt a reference to author Katherine Ann Porter's book (and later movie) of the same title about a group of people returning to Nazi Germany at the beginning of the Second World War, oblivious to the fact that they were the target of the Nazi extermination.

Somewhere between her childhood days in California and her relocation with its accompanying transition to post-slavery South Carolina, probably hold a great many of the answers. Additionally, a stint in Atlanta, where *Gone With the Wind* is still the gold standard, obviously left an indelible impression on her mind, her art and her life, as well.

To be sure Ms. Walker does not paint pretty pictures for your living room wall. She is either out to provoke examination of widely held secrets often buried by racism; or she has yet to seek professional help, but has been able to transmute her angst through various media.

She calls herself and the female subjects of most of her work "Negress"—a derogatory term once used by slave owners—one, I might add, that belongs

on the heap with that other forbidden "n" word. It takes on quite a different meaning linking the dark past with the even darker present, where there is still an unspoken chasm between what Black women have been and what they have become.

The "Negress Narrative" series, which she has freely admitted is rather a depiction of both her love and hate for the heroine (who is herself), is perhaps the most graphic, disturbing and insightful effect racism has had on women of color. The twin evils of racism and sexism jumps out at you at every turn from "Gone: An Historical Romance" thru "Emancipation Approximation."

It is easy to understand the controversy surrounding this prolific artist who has defied both Black and White conventionalities: Whites don't like to be reminded of the crimes against humanity committed by enslaving an entire race of people. They like to be depicted as reasonable, intellectual and generous.

By the same token, having endured the distorted images of Black people for more than 400 years, most Black patrons—especially African American women—do not like the caricatures and down-right distortions Ms. Walker's depictions conjure up when characterizing Black women as the central subject. Already having been subjugated to rape, sexual abuse and subservient positions, most feel that she has inordinately desecrated the image of Black women at a time when the larger White society is trying also to diminish the importance of African American women in real life.

Her method of making small silhouettes larger than life to project the angst and pain that many generally try to bury under nice words, euphemisms and civilities, often flies in the face of both cultures. It definitely opens some wounds Black women have been struggling to heal for decades. Blacks find the images distorted, derogatory and disturbing. Whites find it amusing, and secretly harbor some sense of satisfaction from it. Somewhere on the subconscious level they may even feel this is the true depiction of Black women.

While I applaud her ability to have created a body of work that one cannot easily walk away from without becoming part of the story, I also advise her to seek professional help. There is something sinister and horrible lurking underneath her subconscious trying to get out. The question is this: is she controlling it, or is it controlling her?

— Gloria Dulan-Wilson

ARTISTIC FREEDOM

There are moral, ethical, censorship, economic, psychological, creative freedom, and legal issues to examine with regard to Kara E. Walker's work. Let us first discuss artistic freedom.

In my youth during the 1970s, I felt liberated by using curse words in a play I wrote. When I read the play now, I am somewhat embarrassed. Other writings at that time were sexually explicit for a teenager. When I reflect on what was going on in my social environment and home life, I now understand the ethos and dichotomy of my artistic expression. Nonetheless, I am glad I had the artistic freedom to express myself.

Proponents of Walker defend her right to creative articulation. Opponents say that as long as her expression is depicting African American images in a negative light she should be boycotted. If Walker has the freedom to express herself, then so should the opponents of her work have the freedom to say we do not respect this expression?

I remember when Alice Walker's, *The Color Purple* was decried as "Black misandryous." Feeling that the Black male is stereotypically being portrayed as a villain, many called for the boycott of Alice Walker's book. In support of the opposing view, public artistic expression in America that does not upset the white male status quo will probably always see the light of day. Had Kara Walker's work visualized white males being lynched, castrated, raped and sodomized in an explicit way, would her work have been as popular to her collectors and benefactors? If Kara's work showed white women being raped by Black men, images of white babies being ripped from the bellies of their mothers, would Ms. Walker have been given the same center stage, financial support and hailed as the visual wunderkind of her generation?

Artists cannot live by love alone. Even if they have the resources to create works, most artistic people want to share their work with others. Artists enjoy the feelings of acceptance, affection and appreciation of their artistic value and merit.

I have a mentor who was at the U.S. Tennis Center protesting the statue of Arthur Ashe, mainly because the artist has him in the same way the statue of *David* is visualized— *au natural*. Mr. Ashe's wife, being a photographer, had no objections nor did the U.S.T.A. What other tennis greats have been publicly displayed nude? My mentor felt it was inappropriate, offensive, insensitive and

lewd. Would any statue of an American white sports icon be depicted as such?

Should we draw pictures of Napoleon depicted as being six feet tall? It would distort reality. Is Kara Walker distorting reality? In many ways she is not. I feel she is having a visual past life experience. As one scientist, who has studied and theorized Walker's art, has said: "Walker may be suffering from a generational 'post traumatic slave syndrome'." It is clear there is a therapeutic effect Walker receives through her expression. If we just saw her work, and if she was a committed mental patient, one would clearly say, "This person is disturbed and has been abused."

Has she created multiple personalities to defend her psyche from abusive sadistic behavior past, present and future? Or is she just a "shock jock" trying to financially

and artistically "cash in" on how people will react to her images, while missing her message and point of view.

Movies that showed Blacks liberating themselves from their oppressor were suppressed and replaced by *Boys In The Hood* and *Juice* type movies. Movies that showed destructive violence have been laid at the doorsteps of Black America. I cannot watch *Silence of the Lambs*. Do I feel the person who wrote it was sick or was the author Thomas Harris just depicting the mind of a sick person? Is Walker sick or is she depicting the sickness of slavery? Are we living in a country where the art police will arrest you and censor your work? When a rap group wrote lyrics about killing cops, they were quickly censored. Post-9/11 may have deemed them as making terrorist threats and be subject to arrest. It was pocket book power that took Imus off the air. What pressure is being put on record companies and BET for showing videos that degrade the African American image.

Ms. Walker may have self-censored herself because her images were probably worse than what was exhibited. I cannot watch *Roots* or *Hotel Rwanda*, *Psycho* and *Kill Bill* because of what it does to my psyche. It makes me SAD, MAD and SCARED. Some of the Walker artistic expression is fictional; some not. Regardless, suppression of artistic freedom is a dangerous suggestion. It is like the anti-bacterial soap that also kills the beneficial germs.

Liberating art, theology, economics and education is not what the white majority wants to see, hear and feel. It is too painful to understand the evil sickness that brought about the enslavement of the African and the genocide of the Native American under the guise of freedom. Kara Walker is just one point of view. Unfortunately, her point of view is receiving the support of people who can control what point of view we will see for many years to come.

—Cay Fatima

STATEMENT ON THE COLLAGE TRIPTYCH: *CAPITALISM! CAPITALISM! CAPITALISM*

It is a new world we want not an endowed chair in the concentration camp....

Art must be our magic weapon to create and re-create the world and ourselves as part of it. ..

—Amiri Baraka

The concept for this work is inspired by two lines in the manifesto titled *Art is In Danger!* by George Grosz, John Heartfield, Wieland Herzfelde, reprinted in the anthology *Art on the Line: Essays by Artist about the Point Where Their Art & Activism Intersect*, Edited by Jack Hirschman (Curbstone Press, 2002). The text is about how the rulers abuse culture to cover up their crimes. Hence the stanza; "Art belongs in the palaces of the bloodsuckers, where it may hide their wallsafes." The poetry of this vivid statement never left my head. The more I turned it over in my mind I connected it to the current state of the art market. I think one way to gauge the neo-liberalism of the art world is to check out which artists are promoted and which artists are never allowed out of the basement. It is that statement and the work of Kara Walker I have used as a foundation for my triptych collage entitled *Capitalism! Capitalism! Capitalism! 2008*.

Left panel:

By placing a solider in the foreground of my collage, *Vetoed Dreams, 1995*, offers a critique on the past and present state of America's domestic and foreign policy that is dictated by the business class in this country.

The solider in the foreground functions as if in a mural, painted by the voiceless, who invert the image of the U.\$. Capitol building. They make their dissent visible on the wall, in the street every place in the world where people are affected by a U.\$ Military might that imposes sanctions or overthrows sovereign governments or pollutes the world with its viruses: IMF, G-8, NATO, WTO, along with the Patriot Act that threatens to put a silencer on the weapon of speech!

It is clear that Kara Walker's projected revisionist history mural-sized caricatures are the sceneography in a theatre of white supremacy coming from the mind of a young African American woman who has a Harlequin novel neo-colonial understanding of the world. It is all too contextually believable for her to have been quoted as saying "All black people in America want to be slaves a little bit."¹ When I met Kara Walker at her painter father's (Larry Walker) opening at the Sande Webster Gallery in Philadelphia, I asked her did she say this and she told me she was misquoted. But she never publicly withdrew the statement.

Center panel:

"Art belongs in the palaces of the bloodsuckers, where it may hide their wallsafes" is placed at the top of the center panel because it is the seed for the conception of this work. This triptych is that statement made visual to go beyond the surface, which is why we can see below what's behind the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. It evokes a chilling reminder of the event reported in the April 2003 issue of *Harper's Magazine*, "On January 27, 2003, a tapestry of Pablo Picasso's epic painting *Guernica* that hangs at the entrance of the Security Council of the United Nations building in New York City was deemed an inappropriate background for press briefings about the possibility of a war in Iraq. It was therefore draped."

Right panel:

I chose Kara Walker's silhouette of what looks like a jockey riding a Black woman's back like a horse, to critique its ideological context. For me this image pictures the enslaved wearing good shoes and being enthusiastically submissive to what Amiri Baraka calls "slavemaster Romeos,"² the rapists that rode us like government mules, until the muscle came off our bones.

In Kara Walker's work there is no evidence that we tried to escape this fascist system where everyday life is a living hell. In her revisionist history of slavery we never tried to overthrow it, we submitted happily and paid our way as obedient servants into heaven and Arlington National Cemetery.

For capitalists that want to keep our flesh in chains, the value of Kara Walker's work is priceless, intentional omission to obscure the truth. What's being guarded here is the lie used to justify murder using the hand of an African American woman artist to do the killing off of our history, our fight for self-determination. They kept their hands clean by funding a mockery of our heroic struggle.

The works of Kara Walker and Glenn Ligon, remind me of the reaction James Baldwin had to the assassination of Malcolm X; when he said "the hand that pulled the trigger didn't buy the bullet" So, in this panel the silhouette is protecting the wallsafe and hiding it. The art is being guarded by a global art market of war profiteers, who hold up any artists of color who tow an imperialist line. Mocking artists such as Faith Ringgold, Benny Andrews and others in the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition who, in a ironic twist, were the ones who made it possible for Kara Walker to exhibit at The Museum of Modern Art, The Whitney Museum of American Art and other major institutions.

The promotion of the pro-mammy art of Kara Walker is a move to degrade the potency of revolutionary artists such as Elizabeth Catlett, Charles White, Howardena Pindell, and Betye Saar. It is an effort to make them less visible because unlike the anti-intellectual work of Kara Walker, the art of these artists critically exposes the sick mind of mercantilism and its evil twins—war and slavery!

Her work is never a critical examination of our history of resistance against the flesh business. It can only be read as a pathetic effort to appease the powerful and climb the status ladder erected from our bones. Until some mention of the many slave revolts gets painted into her visual language the depiction of African Americans as a people submissive to rape, lynching, and cultural imperialism will distort our image into racist caricatures. It is because of these facts we wear our flesh like flames fire-hosed with the slobber of biting dogs.

Unlike Walker my goal as an anti-imperialist artist is to create art that will act as propaganda for liberation, refusing to support oppressive regimes and an oligarchy that resolves conflicts with sanctions and nooses of war, where the Pentagon is a wounded guillotine re-tooling factory putting silencers on crucifixion nails

The main argument I put forward in this triptych collage is that it is not possible to understand the history of resistance from the view point of Africans enslaved in America in the visual language used in Kara Walker's work. Her work is identical to Colin Powell's empty projections (under the direction of the Bush-Cheney team) at the UN Security Council to justify the U. \$. going to war in Iraq by showing diagrams saying they were hiding Weapons of Mass Destruction for which there was no evidence.

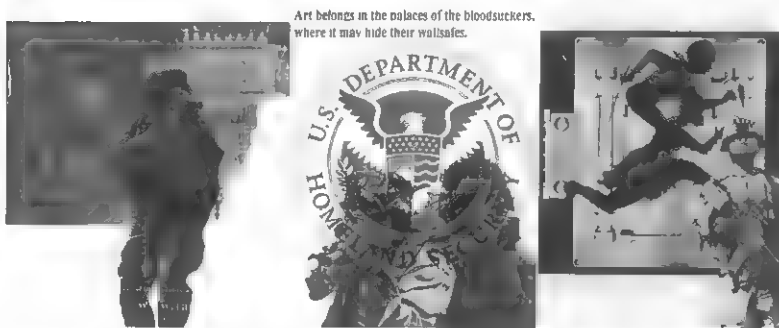
— Theodore A. Harris

Thanks to Howardena Pindell, Stephen Jones, and Stephen Paulmier for their commentary and encouragement on this essay and the artwork.

¹ Kara Walker as quoted by Jerry Saltz in Flash Art 1996.

² This line is from Amiri Baraka's poem titled In the Tradition (For Black Arthur Blythe) in the book *The Music: Reflections on Jazz and Blues*.

William Marrow & Company 1987 by Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and Amina Baraka.



MY COMMENTS REGARDING KARA WALKER'S WORK AND THOSE WHO GIVE HER MONEY AND A PLATFORM IN THE WORLD

I was having a casual discussion with a fellow artist and we ended up talking about Kara Walker. My acquaintance, a Caucasian woman artist, stated that she thought Walker's work "is brilliant." My response was that Kara Walker is one sick chick and bad for the business of being Black and her supporters are akin to slave masters spreading the gospel of Blacks as not even human.

I inquired as to *what* exactly made K. Walker's work "brilliant." The other artist said that Walker wasn't afraid to put sexuality and fantasy out there for everyone to see.

I asked what she thought about the ethnically derogatory imagery perpetuated in K. Walker's work and celebrated worldwide therefore reaffirming and increasing the heinous stereotypes of African-Americans all over the world. A blank stare emanated from her face and finally she said that it never occurred to her that the cartoons were harmful to anyone. She continued to say that she has no feeling one way or the other about the "N" word or the impact of stereotypical imagery regarding African-Americans and slavery. "I'm not Black" she said to me comfortably. "None of that bothers me."

I suggested my White artist counterpart imagine that all of the images and accolades of Kara Walker were instead those of a Jewish Kara Walker. Suppose this Jewish Kara Walker utilized her sexual perversions and other degrading imagery with Holocaust victims as the main characters. Gas chamber parties replacing plantation frolicking. Try considering if this Jewish K. Walker had been quoted as saying, *"Every Jewish person wants to be imprisoned in a concentration camp just a little bit."* This is in reference to the quote by K. Walker that all Black people want to be slaves just a little bit.

The woman was horrified. My point was made.

I do not begrudge Kara Walker in the creation of her work. Artists should be free to create what they want to. However, this work is touted and supported financially by individuals and conglomerates akin to the profiteers of the institution of slavery. It is perfectly acceptable in American culture and around the world to negate and neutralize the specific horrors of slavery perpetrated on each and every Black human being stolen by it, born into it, bred from it and ruined by it. African-Americans have never been allowed to recover from these atrocities as a whole. However, we as a people are expected to "get over it."

Modes of thought, behavior and acculturated practices born out of

subjugation and hate can never be manipulated into anything that builds a solid foundation for fair circumstances, especially in the society responsible for the inception and continuous perpetration of said modalities. Let me know when the same people who profit from continuous destruction of others, the same governments, the same businesses, the same art critics, the same historians, the same social commentators and the same opportunists and closet Racists who support, promote and provide a stage for propaganda against the African-American culture decide to equally promote mass imagery in regards to other ethnic stereotypes, including those of their own ethnicity. My voice will speak loudly against those images for public consumption and financial support also.

—Sonji Hunt

A VOICE FROM THE OTHER SIDE OF THE CANVAS

I am writing as a non-visual artist. Although I try to be visual my mode of expression is word. My usage of paint is verbal. It is my response to the vocabulary of Kara Walker's language that I want to focus on. Ms. Walker often times employs script on her images but her forte is visual representation.

I should like to frame my comments on her work, its effect on me and some of the statements I have read such as interviews and words she has written on her silhouettes within the context of writers and artists whose work and lives have moved me. I think of these writers and artists while searching for words to create sentences, phrases, to help me explicate my reaction to Kara Walker's work. I think of Toni Morrison at a conference on Urban Literature in 1981, at the Newark Campus of Rutgers University, where I was teaching in the Black Studies Department. She was speaking about her approach to writing and in particular, about a novel in progress. Ms. Morrison spoke of her research and the subject of slavery, what it meant to be a slave for a parent, a mother who could not control and own even her breast milk. This image haunted me. She then spoke about language and how she was mining a vocabulary that would do several things; help give words to the story, to hear the voices of her characters as they experience slavery and how to speak the word, slave. Slavery as human catastrophe must be denied language, for to write it is to give it life/voice. And then she used a word I shall always remember although I have just paraphrased what she actually said. Ms. Morrison said slavery should be dis-remembered.

I hear the echoes of "Yet Do I Marvel at this curious thing, to make a poet black, and bid him sing." (Countee Cullen, 1903-46.) The irony of this poem on the one hand seems to be questioning the authority of The Creator's wisdom in making a black artist.

I ask my painterly challenged self, "Self, can you 'read' the images and trust your interpretation? I reflect, "I am a Negro:/ Black as the night is black./ Black like the depths of my Africa." (Langston Hughes, 1902-67.) Then I re-read Kara Walker's words from an interview in *The New Yorker* with Hilton Als, trying to connect words to the silhouettes she produces and the daughter she has birthed. I am trying to see in her work the language of her discussion with Mr. Als.

"Walker sat on her daughter's left. On Octavia's right were two other Walker women, her sister Dana, older and her mother, Gwendolyn." (*The New Yorker*, 8 October, 2007.) "Her daughter draws during the interview much the

way Mrs. Walker says Kara was always drawing as a child." I find this scene surreal and wonder how Kara Walker speaks with and to her child, her sister and, her mother.

So the irony is the usage of grossly exaggerated images in various sexual positions and attitudes with explicit text written on the cut-outs as vehicles to 'talk' about something which language should deny words so as not to make the un-heroic historical, memory. I am woefully aware of the connection between object/ figure, a vocabulary that is vulgar, and making real a dreadful depiction of the descent of humans into the bowels ugliness. I am trying to understand the phrase, "The role of the artist is to make revolution irresistible." How I am or can be inspired by the works and words of Kara Walker is still unclear to me. I do not wish to be enslaved, nor a slave, nor behave slavish to a cruel white enslaver. I struggle to resist all forms of oppression imposed on me, my people, and the world in general. To enter willingly a state of bondage, to become a slave and embrace it is both incomprehensible and revolting.

Over the past years I have encountered the disturbing images of Kara Walker. Her work is on the cover of *Renaissance Noir*, a New York University publication. I saw her work at the Historical Society of New York. A few of her pieces were a part of an exhibition on slavery in New York City that Fred Wilson helped organize. I avoided the exhibition at the Whitney and The Studio Museum in Harlem for all the same reasons; her work and vocabulary, visual and script does not inspire me to struggle against the very stereotypes she claims her works employ to expose and shed light on the 'dark places of human experiences.' Perhaps it is because once light, if that is what it is, is shed, the horrors remain untouched, unmotivated to change, rearrange, or remove the offending images. Rather, the purpose seems to be exhibitionism, to wallow and enjoy the sadism of mutilation and pain.

Over the years the conversations I have been involved in with others who are concerned artists, cultural critics and art lovers, there has been little desire to see more of her work until something else happens in it. But in the interview with Hilton Als, Ms. Walker is unequivocal in her determination to continue to produce the same images. One could say it is tragic that at such a young age, she does not see a need for growth, development and most importantly, a need for some other forms of expression.

While not espousing censoring or controlling of artists, their subject matter, and the product of their medium, one does encourage and expect artists to take responsibility for their work. It becomes more difficult to separate Ms. Walker from her major supporters and the venues that show her work. The history of racism and the overt discrimination of artists of African descent are undeniable. Some years ago

MOMA had a 'discussion' about the dearth of artists of African descent in their permanent collection and as a part of regular exhibitions. While admitting to the need for more inclusion little has changed in the past years.

The public, artists and collectors, all take their cues from critics and supporters who invest in art. When one looks at whom patrons are, and what they patronize, one sees trends and the manufacture of artistic merit. Artists are heralded as brave, courageous, outrageous and their work cutting edge, forging new worlds and setting pace and setting paradigms. In most cases these works contain sexually graphic (porno most times) scenes. One's ability to render 'a new way' to see sex appears to be the yardstick.

Again to quote Kara Walker about her work—she uses these terms: fetish, pornography and masochism. Interestingly words one does not hear are: love, joy intimacy, passion and kindness. She infuses her own autobiography to impose and expose grotesque depictions of both the acts of coitus and genitalia. "I believe the problem with racism in America is that we (?) secretly enjoy it, where would we be without the struggle?" And, later—"All (?) black people in America want to be slaves a little bit." Does it follow then, that, all white people enjoy being enslavers, supremacists? Did Emmett Till want to be tortured to death? Did his mother enjoy her loss? Is that why she displayed his body—a fifteen-year old savagely beaten and mutilated to death? Walker's writing on her images and titles "Notes of a Negress" and "Why I like White Boys" juxtaposed with the bruises on Emmett Till's body or the perforation of Ahmadou Diallo's body. The interconnection with the covert directions of art critic and the sales pitches of business men heaping praises on such work is seen in *The New York Times* review of Holland Cotter. "Her blacks don't resist aggression, or at least not in the obvious ways. They seem to give into it, let themselves be abjectly used, often by one another."

To refer again to the role and responsibility of artists and to look at her statements in the Hilton Als article, it gives one pause to hear, "I am not going to ghettoize. You have 'real' art, and then the art of the ethnic minority." The preponderance of 'ethnic majority' in America and Europe, in art is ghettoizing too. There are countless statements by Kara Walker that could lead one to put aside her very significant artistic abilities and focus on the therapeutic aspect of her life/work. Her sad-masochistic themes, her artistic vocabulary of the silhouettes and color, black on white take us away from the 'real art' and into a realm of 'psychologizing.' While pondering over images, one could come away thinking the artist needs help, is lacking in political and social consciousness in the work. It could lead to doubting the aesthetics and see the obsession as a fractured statement about the affairs of art and a commentary on blackness.

Investors, critics and art patrons who support this work use pseudo-crit language to obscure both context and content. While Kara Walker can, should, and must be able to do, say and perform her artistic themes and images in any manner she wishes, we, the on-lookers have the right and responsibility to not be amused, provoked or titillated. The thought that she will continue this work all of her life is a sad one. There is nothing in her work that inspires struggling for a

better world for all of us, including her daughter. That she has probably decades left to do this work is not something I look forward to. I hope a kindness and love will enter her heart and inspire another view, perspective and vocabulary that will project us into a world of hope and possibilities and that her current sponsors will lovingly help and support her in that process.

—Rashidi Ishmah

ART OF WAR

Her billing is lost on the last page of our conscience
amongst artifacts and disappearing bees. Photos
displayed of white sand shores and mango sunsets
neglect melons rotting on Jamaican vines as the

WTO declares exports denied. Gardens of Eden on
Haitian streets show Adam and Eve running through
fruit filled markets as babies die starving on corners
because no one paints fallow fields and subsidized

rice. Homage is paid to Egyptian tombs, masks of
gold, corpses and Cleopatra, while food riots grace the
banks of the Nile and mass graves honor no one.
Which museum will house Rwandan skulls and DNA

maps of Diaspora slaves? Will Damien Hirst's blood
diamond thirst reveal the art's identity or time of death;
its art, for the love of God. Myanmar dictates
performance art as we watch the body count rise on our

HDTV telethon meter, 1,000,000, 1,000,001, 1,000,002,
1,000,003 . . . and Katrina became the most famous
name in New Orleans replacing Bo Diddley and Louis
Armstrong while Kara Walker sleeps soundly with

Norton antivirus soothing her bestial desires. Wynton
Marsalis, play a dirge for the baby men mining Coltan
and the baby men fighting in the DRC because they'll
never have a sexy iPhone to read Sun Tzu's *The Art of
War*, widely read by men framed in paintings lining
castle walls. Young men and women quilt tales of despair
in a world built on greed. Bombs paint streets with
blood and debris reminiscent of Jackson Pollack canvases

and mothers cry for their babies in the name of martyrdom. *Guernica*, remind us why you survive. Gwendolyn Brooks reminds me, furious flowers live among the weeds to win the battles we have to win and war has its consequences.

1,000,004, 1,000,005, 1,000,006, 1,000,007. . . .

— F. Geoffrey Johnson

COMMENTS ON THE WORK OF KARA WALKER

The unfortunate thing about the artworld in the United States, is that too often the "Powers That Be" (usually white people), decide who is going to be the "Black Star of the Day." Like every area of Life, politics and individuals' perspectives and values, influence their decisions. This is particularly true in the artworld.

Too often so much of art in the capitalist world is based on "hype and connections." This is part of what has happened with regard to the work of Kara Walker (and also Basquiat). Today, conscious Black people are trying to get beyond the "victim and buffoon mentality." We are trying to have power over our circumstances whether they be economic, political, or cultural. It amazes me how the great masters like Elizabeth Catlett, Betye Saar and many other black art masters don't get half the recognition given to Walker and Basquiat. What amazes me even more is how a number of Black Americans just go along with it and accept this situation because the "white powers that be" have labeled it and pronounced "this is great art."

People need to do their research. When one really knows the history of what Black artists have accomplished and contributed to the history of art in the United States, they can then put Kara Walker's art in its appropriate category.

—Ben Jones

CHANNELING KARA'S NEGRESS: CONJURING HER VOICE

I attended *Margaret Garner* a magnificent, new American opera by Richard Danielpour with the libretto by Toni Morrison at Lincoln Center in New York City. This true story of Margaret Garner's life as an enslaved woman who tragically sacrifices her children rather than have them live enslaved also inspired Toni Morrison's book *Beloved*.

The lyrics from the opera resonated to the core of my being. I cried after hearing Robert's magnificent voice singing these words to Margaret as he was planning their escape from slavery.

The lyrics are:

Margaret:

Oh Lord, I am gonna cry.

Robert:

You? Not you!

My solder girl's going to cry?

It's alright, It's alright.

(Tenderly) Go Cry Girl!

Girl Go Cry!

You have won your tears

When I viewed Kara Walker's work "My Complement: My Enemy: My Oppressor: My Love," I saw that the enslaved woman that Kara called the "Negress" had won her tears also. Only this time she had won the tears inflicted upon her by her white master and a black woman: Her creator Kara Walker.

I am assuming the role of a 21st Century protector of a "Negress." I will become the voice that she never had and speak through her. I will not question Kara's right as an artist to create her, however, I will channel the woman in Kara's work, conjure up her feelings and become, her advocate, her voice, her comforter, her love. She is unprotected, degraded and conflicted. She feels powerless and wants to be freed from the bondage of Kara's imagery just as she, the enslaved woman, was powerless to free herself from the original rape and bondage.

I will now channel the "Negress" and conjure up her voice, as she speaks to her creator.

Why, Kara, in your work, "My Complement: My Enemy: My Oppressor: My Love," are you inventing such blatant pornographic acts for me to enact presenting them as if they are some type of bizarre historic re-interpretation?

Kara, why are you doing this to me? You are presenting me as some type of hyper-sexualized, masochistic sex object who releases her bowel movements. Do I also stink?

Why are you, a black woman enslaving me once again. Haven't we suffered enough? Must I in the 21st century re-live horrors and be victimized once again. The first time was horrific in its historic reality- this time the rape is horrific in its subversive fantasy.

Kara:

At the bottom of the social hierarchy in America was the black woman, suppressed both as woman and as black woman, the cheapest item on the labour market, manipulated as sexual object or as servant. Two images predominate: the black woman who is regarded as sexually available and equated with the prostitute 'Brown Sugar'; and the desexualized mammy of the Aunt Jemima type.¹

I can feel all black women crying: Go Cry Girl, Girl Go Cry; you have won your tears.

The one important reason for the institutionalization of slavery in American was the regulation of sexual relations. This historic analysis was taken from a chapter called "Libido and Lynching" from the book White on Black—Images of African and blacks in Western Popular Culture. The author states that slavery was made legal for the first time in 1661 in Virginia and in 1663 in Maryland. This was the result of an edict aimed specifically to a white woman who showed a preference for black men. The edict stated that the white woman who married a black man had to serve the slave's master for as long as her black husband lived and all of her children from that union were slaves.²

Hence the white woman would also be a slave.

This was the beginning of legal restraint placed upon interracial cohabitation. After this 'The Black Codes' were established. These codes were placed to keep the white woman away from the black man.³ The black woman was left unprotected. Her man was portrayed as a hyper-sexed, gigantic walking phallus and the white woman was portrayed as a white innocent goddess.⁴

I am you, I am your mother, I am your daughter. He is your father, your brother, your son.

The twin myths of the black beast and the white goddess turned into violence after Emancipation and Reconstruction. In the US between 1884 and 1900 more than 2500 blacks were lynched and this lynching was often coupled with a castration.⁵

The economic depression of the 1890s and the vulnerability of the Southern plantation economy due to the loss of the Civil War created political and economic insecurities in the South. A psychotic outlet resulted from the inflammable combination of 'race' and sexuality and dire economic conditions. Between 1889 and 1899 a person was lynched every other day and nine cases out of ten the victim was a black who had been accused of rape.⁶

Kara do not re-emasculate the black man by depicting him having sex with the white master and also having a child! That is the ultimate in degradation. This is the ultimate castration. If the actual historic reality were not so horrendous this could all be a joke, however, in this case, history was stranger than fiction as the white man's penis envy was psychotic enough to allow him to castrate the flaccid penis of a dead black man.

This portrayal of "the hyper-sexed Negress" as an active participant in your weird psycho-sexual drama can release the white man of unresolved guilt in the damage done to his own psyche caused by the unforgivably cruel treatment of black people in this country.

That graphic video of the negress gladly committing fellatio with her large moving lips on the white master's genitals with the release of the semen was one example of this exoneration of the white man's guilt. The Negress is presented as committing this act freely and willingly. The white man is left to feel that if she desires me and wants to commit fellatio on me this is not rape as she is enjoying all of this.

The presence of large numbers of mulatto children betrayed the sins of white men, not only did the whites classify the mulatto as "Negro," and thereby try to deny that sexual intercourse had ever taken place between whites and blacks: they also transferred their own lusts and their anxieties of black male retaliation to their fear of black men as sexual threats to white women.⁷

Your porno-psycho-drama is presented in a space that is imagined yet appears real. This creates a tension that is suffocating and creates a kind of pseudo reality that confronts race and leaves no one free of guilt.

I, your Negress resents the guilt placed upon me, as I was the unwitting

player in your drama and in the madness of slavery.

You, My Creator: My Protagonist: My Self: My Enemy, are a satirical trickster who has possibly been hurt by both races and you are clever enough to invite us both to participate in your revenge. Are the scars of racism the reason for all of this madness? I heard your child's plaintive cry of "I wish I were white, I wish I were white." Could that be you? Could this be the cry of someone who may resent all that is black which might even include yourself.

I understand the madness. It is a kind of self-hatred bred by being raised in a country in which the others are always seen as being better; being more powerful; having more money; being more moral and portrayed as being more beautiful.

These tenets were created to remove the whites from the guilt of slavery however now it has seeped into the DNA of this nation, and many times if we the blacks do not take a conscious appraisal of the damage, sometimes the healing does not take place and some are left wishing "that they were white."

The scars can run deep. Kara, even though you portray me "your negress" so negatively I feel that you may be a victim yourself. Just as we all may be. There is so much work that needs to be done to counter-act and heal the damage that racism has done to the psychological condition of Americans.

Kara, My Creator: My Oppressor: My Protagonist: My Self

I am not your Negress.

I am You

I hear

Go Cry Girl, Girl Go Cry; you have won your tears,

We,

Are Proud: Beautiful: Dignified black women

We,

Are not "Negresses"

We, are tired of the madness and

We, vow to

Cry no more.

—Charlotte Ka

- ¹ Clinton, C., *The other Civil War: American women in the nineteenth century*, New York, 1984, pg.33-9
- ² ightfoot,C.M.,*Human Rights*, U.S. Style, New York,1977, pg. 86-7.
- ³ Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *White on Black, Image of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture*, 1992, pg. 174
- ⁴ Blackwell,J.E., 'Social and legal dimensions of interracial liaisons', D.Y Wilkerson an R. L. Taylor, *The black male in America: Perspectives on his status in contemporary society*, Chicago, 1977, pg 226.
- ⁵ Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *White on Black, Image of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture*, 1992, pg. 176.
- ⁶ Williamson, J. *A rage for order :Black-white relations in the America South since Emancipation*, New York/Oxford,1986, pg.82-89
- ⁷ Takaki, R.T., *Iron Cages: Race and culture in 19th Century American*, London, 1980, pg. 59.

BLASPHEMOUS IMAGES: THE IRONIC MASQUERADES OF KARA WALKER

FROM: *THE EMANCIPATION APPROXIMATION, 1999-2000*

Could there be a reason for an insulted person to adopt into his own vocabulary the words that have come into existence for the sole purpose of degrading him? His interest, his curiosity, his desire—do they signal agreement? Do they even make him the offender's accomplice, setting him up against those who have been put in "their place" by means of those hurtful words? Kara Walker's large silhouettes (Deutsche Guggenheim Berlin exhibition) are populated by the very characters white America devised as representations of those who had been shipped from Africa into slavery—images that rendered black Americans invisible by prescribing the norms of perception for generations to come, allowing Americans of European descent to deny their black fellow men basic human rights and still feel themselves to be in accordance with the Enlightenment ideals of citizenship. Although those images—stylized portrayals of good-natured *mammies*, obsequious but sly *sambos* and rebellious *coons* and *pickaninnies*, *nigger wenches*—were simply negating the humanity of those supposedly portrayed, they each nonetheless make their appearance in Walker's silhouette dramas: in degrading positions and involved in drastic scenes of sex and violence; humiliated or humiliating others, or watching humiliating acts as, so it seems, consenting bystanders. We recognize them by their precise, emblematic outlines; the artist can rely upon our racist knowledge. Kara Walker belongs to a number of younger African American artists who work with the archives of racist imagery. She does not, however, liberate her black characters from the epic of the archetypes; she is not interested in deconstructing and rewriting history. Instead, she returns to the stages of the racist imagination in the slave-holding American South and redirects the old dramas, making them suitable to her own artistic interests.

Does she empower the black characters? She equips them with a certain freedom of action, even with pleasure; in doing that, however, she deliberately stays in line with racist norms of stereotypical portrayal.

She also introduces white characters to her world of silhouettes. They all inflict violence upon each other, but are united in a sexualized whirl of stereotypes. Walker dares to wed the autobiographical accounts of slave narratives to the racist fantasies of white supremacists. For many African Americans, this amounts to an outrage, a slap in the face; her art has met with much anger. Consequently, there have been ongoing and controversial debates about it ever since it was first exhibited in the early nineties.

The artist Betye Saar assailed Walker for playing into the hands of white racists instead of criticizing racism. In her most popular piece "The Liberation of Aunt Jemimah," Saar herself has dealt with racist iconography—in a deliberately emancipated fashion.

Artist and author Howardena Pindell ascribes the enthusiastic responses of white critics to Walker's reinforcement of negative stereotypes of black people; she also describes the art scene as a "disguised neo-colonial" arena where African American artists who create positive portrayals of black people are condemned to obscurity. Walker, according to her critics, defames and mocks the memory of slaves; they think of her work as the revival of the minstrel show, in which white America entertained itself, mocking its "niggers," who were so very much like badly-behaved children. And what could possibly justify the conscious inheritance of such a tradition? White men (very few of the performers were female) blackened their faces with burnt cork to act and sing in "comical" sketches of "black life." Their audience consisted of white men, women, and children, the majority of them coming from the lower classes. Much more than just a marginal sideshow attraction, blackface minstrelsy marked the beginning of the American entertainment industry (it was also the first of America's pop cultural exports). Decades later, its spirit resided in the movie cameras even before they first began to whirl. One of the earliest feature films was *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 1903, produced with a cast of white actors in blackface. *The Jazz Singer*, 1927, which introduced sound to the big screen, is about a blackface performer who in the end, realizing his true self as a white man, no longer requires the mask. The blackface performance is a practice of racial demarcation: the surface masquerade affirms the "racial truth" that lies behind it. Or rather, it creates that truth. D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, 1915, widely recognized as one of the groundbreaking works in the history of film, is a drama about white women whose sexual and racial purity is threatened by black villains played by white actors in blackface, complete with a happy ending in which white men restore the "natural" order by force. Minstrelsy's expression of racial contempt was ambivalent, betraying, as it did, fundamental fears of blurring racial boundaries as well as a secret desire to transgress that very line.

More than just an occasion for ridiculing blacks, it allowed white America to invent itself by creating archetypal images of blackness. Put on a black mask, take it off, have a good laugh, and, in sharp contrast, reveal the essential truth. The birth of a white nation. In the mid-nineteenth century, the decline of the Southern plantation system was inescapably underway. Blackface minstrelsy contained a powerful message of reassurance in a moment of crisis: an historically outdated order collapsed, to be resurrected as a nostalgic ideal. It is this carousel, frozen in mid-movement as if under a spell, that Kara Walker sets back in motion. The protagonists start moving, leaving the position prescribed to them by contemporary white and black orthodoxies to engage

in the outrageous, perverse intimacy that the minstrel show both negated and revealed—"The Burden of Representation." For centuries, the African American struggle for freedom was tantamount to demanding equal status as human beings and inclusion in the all-American pursuit of happiness. This appeal to the Enlightenment's humanistic ideals was never without irony, since Africans, in the Enlightenment's celebration of the individual, more often than not were relegated to the lower ranks of humanity, if not excluded altogether. Among the men who signed the American Declaration of Independence in 1776, which announced that "all men are created equal," were slave owners. In 1772, Phillis Wheatley, poet and slave, was called before a committee of Boston honorary citizens to prove that she was indeed the author of her writings; according to the science of the day, Africans possessed no creative capacities. In 1955, a brave woman named Rosa Parks jump-started the Civil Rights Movement by claiming the right to take *any* seat in a public bus, race notwithstanding. Still, up until November 2000, the state of Alabama, home to Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks, had a law prohibiting interracial marriages. Slave narratives were not only descriptions of the gruesome realities of slavery; they also provided the means by which the authors invented themselves as free men, claiming authorship for their lives, as well. They were literally writing their autonomy, which, by definition, no slave could ever possess. The paradigmatic slave narrative was authored by Frederick Douglass, who had escaped into freedom and, following Emancipation, became the spokesman for all black Americans—the first in a long succession of public intellectuals. Not surprisingly, it was also Douglass who first formulated the classic critique of the spectacle of minstrelsy, as it was most recently taken up by Spike Lee in his film *Bamboozled*: it is a misrepresentation of black people and an act of cultural exploitation. If the minstrel show entailed a misrepresentation of black people, this meant that he, Frederick Douglass, was also included. Just as he, Phillis Wheatley, and countless others were.

—Karsten Kredel

Note: Karsten Kredel was unknown to us when we compiled the potential list of writers for this collection. The essay appeared in our e-mail without information regarding the writer's identification or affiliation. Our search for information revealed that it had been previously printed in a publication distributed by Deutsche Bank. Our repeated e-mails and telephone calls to the New York Branch of the Bank, in an effort to obtain reprint permission, went unanswered. We asked the help of several American artists living in Germany to find Kredel and finally a friend-of-a-friend provided Kredel's publisher's name. There we found only a fax number but no postal or e-mail address. Needless to say, the fax would not or could not get through. Since we believe the essay is a valuable addition to this collection we have taken the liberty of including it in this book.

APOPLEXY: THE FUROR OVER KARA WALKER

In 1994, I walked into the *Drawing Center* in Downtown Manhattan, veered right into the main gallery and along the left wall. At or near the end of that wall I encountered Kara Walker for the first time. I was transfixed. But I knew exactly what I was looking at. The inevitability of an artist of this kind had always been in the back of my mind. Given all the social discourse, Marxist turn Neo-con ideologues, and general art world pathology, there seemed to be a goal to land us in the world of the abject. Finally, the art world has succeeded in finding an artist who melds the burden of social consciousness with its fatalistic drift towards human degradation.

Kara Walker is a phenomenon. Since her debut, her vision has engendered extreme fits of anger. Her detractors are in a state of apoplexy. They are out for blood. There are many positive assessments of her work that have been published in the art journals. The attacks have come mainly from sectors of the art community that remain marginalized by the mainstream powers. What is required here is the appropriate context to critique this work, in a way that rises above whether or not one simply likes the work, or whom one is who likes or dislikes the work. With this approach, it might be possible to respect the artist's achievement, and comprehend how she has managed to incite so many to love or hate her art.

This art is an allegorical form of communication. There is a special social-political history that informs it. The beauty of this allegory is that it is derived from the experience of a particular person—not from dogma. The artist's personal story leads to many levels of discovery and eventually says more than one can see in the initial confrontation with the art. Walker's early life, detailed in numerous accounts, holds vital clues to her unique identity and is believed to be the source of her artistic drive.

Walker was born to highly educated parents in Stockton, California, where she had shown promise as an artist at a very young age. At age 13 the family relocated to Stone Mountain, Georgia, a suburb of Atlanta. It is here, in the cultural mayhem of the South, that this black adolescent girl from Northern California began to focus as an artist. Primed with a Yankee education in American history, the young artist enjoyed a cornucopia of historical images (antebellum South) and cultural oddities peculiar to the South that has enriched her art seemingly to no end. The images and psychologies that find their way into Walker's art are ubiquitous to the old and the so-called "New South."

A visual inventory of the young Kara's new environment begins with Stone Mountain, a monstrous granite rock well known not only for its geology, but also for its social history. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., referenced it in the "I Have a Dream" speech when he said: "let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia!" There is an enormous bas-relief on the mountain's north face, of a Confederate memorial commissioned by the *Ku Klux Klan* and the *United Daughters of the Confederacy* that was started by Gutzon Borglum, the creator of Mount Rushmore. In between then and now, a further inventory of this new environment will reveal more of what Walker calls "the theater of Southern identity." Among these are the principal proponents of *Intelligent Design*, the pious attitudes of *The Christian Right*, and its parallel world of the infidels (outcasts, derelicts, and adulterers) of Tennessee Williams' "kinky" South, and the submerged deviancy that stems from the unacknowledged but ongoing commingling of these disparate psychologies. And then there is the specter of *The Black Bourgeoisie*, the dark apparition of southern culture. These are a centuries old conservative, well-to-do southern group that dates back to the first black millionaires in the 1870s. The Walker's "reverse" migration brought Kara into this realm where remnants of this old social order, strongly shaped by preoccupations with skin tones and class, still has some sway. Among the conceits a young Kara would confront at the heart of this group's mores is the absurd "brown paper bag test."

Walker's black paper silhouettes are both conceptually and formally brilliant. And as with most contemporary representational art, the mimetic tradition is shifted to favor iconic signification, whereby each rendered image often differentiated by scale—serves as sign. It is an art that is confident but jokey, sometimes vulgar, and always in flux. Possible formal influences from the African American art traditions might be: "Aspects of Negro Life: The Negro in an African Setting," by Aaron Douglas, 1934; in the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, and the brooch called "The Black Cameo" by Coreen Simpson. Given her background, and the depth and breadth of her education, Walker has most likely seen these examples.

Walker's images can be jolting to African American sensibilities. Her dexterous mastery of this imagery confounds her detractors. Because her program stays in flux, every point of contention when activated becomes a junction of multiple reading. She was 24 years old at the time of her debut at the *Drawing Center*. The curators selected the piece: "Gone, An Historical Romance Of A Civil War As It Occurred Between The Dusky Thighs Of One Negress And Her Heart." In some of her other scenes black and white children are seen running through them like Henry Darger's little girls, but in this piece a precocious black girl is depicted performing oral sex on a pleasantly bemused white boy. The image is both innocent and disturbing, both degrading and liberating. The incident/image is at once just child sex play, while at the same time it alludes to the more sinister things that everyone knows happened on the plantations. For many

African Americans such depictions are degrading. While for a white male (art critic) images of black female lasciviousness produced by a black female herself might be liberating, because they break the black victim paradigm and bring to a halt the perpetual white male guilt machine. The heavy flogging that the white male has endured for centuries over plantation sex presupposes that not one black individual ever enjoyed a single moment of it, and that absolutely not one of these sexual encounters was ever consensual. Here, Walker has depicted a consensual sexual encounter, under frightful circumstances, using children as stand-ins for adults—as she often does.

For a black person it is easy to feel unease in the presence of Walker's art. Her detractors demand images (signs) that ennoble their subjects, specifically the black subjects. The current art world's drift towards the abject displays a psychology, not generally valued in the high art paradigm that most African-Americans identify with "fine art." To date, no one has reasoned out an intelligent engagement of black aspiration within the ethos of the avant-garde, a problem that dates back to its rejection of *Social Realism* in the 1930s. Nonetheless, in an art world full of Nan Golden's and Robert Mapplethorpe's, works, it is critical to examine this work outside the ethos of the *Cosby Show*. The accusation that Walker is a contributor to the *Abject Art* obsession has credence. Although it has not been fully critiqued, it is here that the controversy emanating from her art actually resides. Examples of her work that show a penchant for the abject include: "Untitled (Girl in profile)" 1993–1994, a depiction of a grinning vulgar little hermaphrodite defecating on itself—while standing. Also, in 2006 and 2007 respectively, her work appeared in the "Into Me / Out of Me" exhibition co-organized by P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, MOMA; and KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin. One of the most startling encounters in this exhibition was a video of the performance artist Bob Flanagan, hammering a nail through the head of his own penis into a piece of wood.

Walker and her detractors have arrived at their engagement from mutually exclusive terms of discourse. For her part, her practice is essentially existentialist, and is understood best as a vehicle for putting her own psyche and personal power-game into play. Often, the principal figures represent various personifications of the artist herself, whereby she acts out theaters of derision and personal predilections. Among these alter egos, is a deranged looking Josephine Baker-like figure, that might appear as a grotesque Lolita toying with her quarry, or as an ugly Lucia (Charlotte Rampling's character in the film: "The Night Porter"). As for her detractors, the uproar over her supposed use of particular images intentionally as stereotypes result from a simplistic misreading. Which is, given that the identity aspects of Walker's subjects are incidental to the personal, they are not compliant within the exigencies of identity politics. The ethnic (sign) lexis of this work is purely the indisputable byproduct of the artist's own ethnicity and related histories. While Walker's art may spend a

lot of time mocking Southern culture and history, it is also indifferent to the pretensions of the black bourgeoisie, as well as the puritan high mindedness of African American culture in general. But the assertion that a particular image is structurally stereotypical, does not comprehend the artist's system of symbolic logic. Without the abject treatment, the controversy over her supposed use of black subjects as stereotypes becomes moot.

Artists continually breach fidelity with the past, by rejecting old dogmas that want to control what they do. As Arthur C. Danto declared in his 1997 book: *After The End of Art: Contemporary Art and The Pale of History*, the age of the manifesto is over. Today, art cannot be taken for consideration outside the complexity of its own allegory. The "free allegory" opens up intellectual space, and allows for a wider range individual exploration and predilections. It liberates the artist from socially imposed constraints such as those arising from cultural mandates, a circumstance that existed with Communist art, Nazi art, and regrettably with the so-called community-empowerment messages of *Black Power* era art as well.

True art is a phenomenon that seeps out of the human psyche entirely as it is. As for those who demand an end to this artist and her practice, theirs is an effort that serves only to deny this artist her vision, and therefore her humanity, and is an imprudent denunciation of the spirit of all art. Whatever nefarious purpose, it is feared, the evildoers might have planned for this art; only a very good artist can achieve it. Unfortunately for this concern, Kara Walker is a very good artist. However, the instrumental value of her art, for good or for ill, remains a question.

—Howard McCaleb

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ABOUT KARA WALKER

"Well behaved women seldom make history." Slogan on one of my favorite T-shirts—author unknown. (Although I hope to be the exception, if history dictates that I, personally, have been well behaved. Ha!)

This slogan appears to be true of Kara Walker. Some think she has been very, very bad and others think she is a genius, and, in all truthfulness I have never seen Kara Walker's work up close and personal. The pursuit of creating and selling my own art work keeps me so busy that occasionally I'm out of the loop on some things.

The outrage caused by her work has finally knocked on my studio door and invited me to offer my opinion. After reading, researching, and looking at her images, I've got one.

First, after seeing some of her paper cut-out images I was a little appalled and somewhat shocked. (Imagine me shocked—a child of the 60s!) by the grotesqueness of her images and when I saw some of the accolades she had received I thought about the above mentioned slogan.

Some of her images are in direct opposition to what I and many of my artists friends have struggled to achieve since the late 1950s—to create beautiful positive images of African Americans because many of the images put out there (mostly by other cultures) were not. Over time things have gotten better but that did not leave us unemployed because the struggle continues.

That being said, I don't particularly care for her work but I feel she has the right to portray whatever she wants. One of the reasons I became an artist was because I felt imprisoned in terms of what I was supposed to think and what other people's visions of what a black woman is and could be. I chose art because in that realm I am FREE. FREE to express myself, free to be me, whoever that is. The other side of this freedom, however is that everyone might not agree with your views and you have to be able to deal with that.

Then there is the reality that as African American artists our own people do not support us enough. Which evolves into other people deciding who our shining stars are. These are the people who have the money, and the access to galleries, museums, and grants.

It has little to do with what our community wants; it's their ideas of what black art is that becomes "valid." One would think that at this point in time, things would be different but the reality is, in some ways, we are still on the plantation.

Another thing is—controversy sells. “Being bad” sells. Controversy and the resulting publicity makes people want to come out and see. It makes money for those who exhibit/exploit it.

I think if we really feel the attention and the accolades given to Kara Walker are problematic then this is what we should do: everyone chip in and create our own grant-giving organization and give money to some of the people who have been “Cultural Warriors,” especially the older artists who have been struggling against an uphill battle on a downhill street for thirty, forty, fifty and even sixty years. Open up more museums and galleries that are funded and curated by our own people. Where we can choose what we think should be displayed. Where we will be free to select our own she-eros and heroes. Until that time, this will not be the last time that negative images of us will be celebrated.

—Dindga McCannon

IMPOSTURE IN THE GRAND STYLE: MUSINGS ON THE ILLUSTRATIONS OF KARA WALKER

Let's not be afraid of words: this poverty makes our comfort possible. Moaning about distant bombings was our luxury. Our cowardice will prevent us from opening our eyes here. In order to complete the scenario, we have perfected an imposture in the grand style: to a few carefully chosen blacks we have granted celebrity status, and we have multiplied their image, but only so that they will remain what we ask them to be: actors and comedians.

—Jean Genet, "Letter to American Intellectuals," 1970

Undressing the image of its fundamental political and cultural implications is not an issue of art in the case of Kara Walker. It is however an issue of commerce and "sexual accounting." As many illustrations never will be viewed as art, Walker's works from the school girl scribbles to the large format cutouts will always exist as an operative "product" with "intent" outside of itself. The desire is external not coming from within the artist otherwise such works would be created and destroyed succinctly.

Remembering an essay on Duchamp by Donald Kuspit, it is easy to see how a number of illustrators and artists could be described in the manner that Kuspit defines Duchamp: All the anxious, intellectualizing talk, including Duchamp's about the alchemical and sexual implication of his oeuvre is secondary to, and a smokescreen hiding, the fact that Duchamp had no secure sense of himself as a creative artist, and more fundamentally as an autonomous self. (Kuspit 67)

Certainly an illustrator has the choice to create any image he or she chooses, but as Kuspit points out when the language around that image obliterates its first function of existence then that image is questionable. Unlike the great illustrations of Daumier or Goya's amazing etchings from "The Disasters of War," Walker's illustrations *need* talk and talk they have received.

A seventy-year old white man in South Georgia making these same illustrations would be the recipient of a very different talking critique. The work would be relegated to the back of the bus as racist propaganda. The old racist would not be invited to gracefully pose on the cover of art publications either. If Walker's illustrations did not titillate a fundamental base emotion in a mass of individuals then there would be no talk. What is rather unfortunate is the lack of self-awareness of the individuals that use such illustrations as Walker's as a surrogate for sexual stimuli.

Few writers have been as self aware and focused on the manias or as he called them "passions" of the individual as the Marquis de Sade. He would have recognized Walker's illustrations instantly for what they are: titillating hieroglyphs accounting a few of the six hundred manias in *The 120 Days of Sodom*. As Sade states in the introduction: Many of the extravagances you are about to see illustrated will doubtless displease you, yes I am well aware of it, but there are amongst them a few which will warm you to the point of costing you some fuck, and that, reader is all we ask of you. (Marquis de Sade, *The 120 Days of Sodom*.)

Of course it is also the issue of race that titillates, and most importantly let's not forget, sells these illustrations. Walker's work masquerading as art in venues where it does not belong is no less a crime than finding Norman Rockwell's illustrations or Bavarian Moter Werkes' motorcycles in the Guggenheim. That has more to do with the intellectually lazy individuals that continually end up presiding over America's museums. A racist cartoon is no more than another commodity attracting attendance to the museum.

If sexual perversion and sexual violence is indeed Walker's true focus then it would be worthwhile for her to complete Sade's cycle of manias from *The 120 Days of Sodom*. It is obvious that Walker shares a kinship to de Sade's heroine Juliette, weaving tales and images together in order to extract funds and services from as many individuals as possible all the while proudly maintaining a libertine image without introspection.

No matter how much ink is spliced to paper, hoping to extract Walker's oeuvre from the domain of racist illustrations, the only art that remains is that of commerce and graft.

—Tad Mike

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DIASPORA/REALITIES/ STRATEGIES

Introduction

African-American artists in the diaspora face continuing cutbacks in American government funding of the arts due to conservative pressure in Congress, a situation which has led to the restriction and/or curtailment of organizations serving African-American communities and the general public. The contradictory and often negative reception and rejection of their work in the mainstream American and international European-based visual arts communities has been accompanied by the suppression and ferocious censure or trivialisation of art historians and art critics who wish to change and diversify the canon. African American artists willing to cynically indulge in producing imagery of negative-stereotypes of African-Americans often find the reception warms in the European community as their work become acceptable commodities for the consumption of mainstream Eurocentric communities. This strategy panders to racism and further enhances excuses for negative formations of public policy set in motion by conservative elements in America. Various strategies have been developed by African American artists to counter this and cope with other complex forces that seem to implant permanently the malicious practices of the past that restricted women and non-Europeans. The dialectics of the past embedded and reproduced in the global and local corporate media has unfortunately maintained or kept in motion subtle reminders of colonial practices in today's post-colonial/ neo-colonial world. The result has been a narrowing of creative possibilities for nations across the global community, leaving diverse cultural productions once again vulnerable to appropriation and co-option. This new round of restrictions is accompanied by the exasperating implication that efforts made to ensure a balance over a very short period of time failed to yield any instant healing of past evils because of the imagined shortcomings of those targeted and victimised by earlier colonial structures.

Diaspora/Realities/Strategies

Faced with what is dressed up as post-colonialism, African-American artists as well as Latino, Native American, and Asian artists in the U.S. find that they must now manoeuvre in a disguised neo-colonial atmosphere. The actions and rhetorical denials pervasive within the mainstream art world have caused renewed cognitive dissonance and frustration for African-American artists. It has created the need for counter-moves and carefully managed strategies by African-American artists living in the diaspora. Their cultures and creativity are now penetrated by subtle as well as aggressive forms of media-managed colonialism. This global technological control is operated through what we see, hear and are told to set before us as the standards for

existence. Our inner worlds and images under this bombardment become fragile, more easily penetrated and disrupted. Our cultures undergo a restructuring because global technologies usually omit everything that does not relate to and benefit the global spheres of profit for those in power—those who work to manipulate through their technology and military aggression.

Currently in the United States visual artists who do not cater to the bottom line (profit) or who upset the conservative elements that are settling into many sectors of public policy are often factored out and pushed into limited commercial venues or dwindling alternative venues. One bizarre example of this, cited in the *New York Times* occurred in conservative Cobb County, Atlanta, Georgia in 1993. All arts funding was cut including children's programming, and the money was turned over to law enforcement. Artists already ostracised from the general population in terms of support and patronage continued to be split again along the lines of race, gender, and sexual preference.

In my research for my book *Heart of the Question* (1997), I compared my findings concerning the number of New York City art galleries that restricted their representation to European and European-Americans in the 1980s with their numbers in the 1990s. Of the galleries surveyed, 36 were totally European or European-American in 1986-87. In 1996, 13 of these galleries had closed and four new ones emerged. Eighteen had remained completely European or European-American. It was from this pool of galleries that the majority of artists, mostly male, were selected and umbrella-ed by a sponsoring museum for dwindling government funding of one-person exhibitions.

Of the 482 art galleries listed in the September 1997, New York edition of the international publication *The Gallery Guide*, only twenty represent one, and on rare occasions two African-American artists. Native-American, Latino, and Asian artists are not necessarily represented by these galleries. Although the figures were an increase from the 1980s, African-American artists did not feel that this tokenism is an improvement. Whereas there are now more African-American art galleries in the United States, their artists are rarely represented in international Biennales or international art publications. African-American art galleries represent a wide range of styles, including abstraction, figurative and installation. If the European and European-American art galleries do represent an African-American artist, they seem to prefer to represent work that has a clear indication of the artist's race, depicts the African-American body, or in recent years, depicts negative racial stereotypes of African Americans.

This trend appears to have reached a hysterical pitch with the narcotic enthusiasm of the European and European-American public, as well as museums with a large European and European American membership, for the work of Kara Walker and Michael Ray Charles. Both artists use demeaning images of African Americans.¹ This enthusiasm has been further inflated by the collusion of wealthy European-American patrons and their sycophants. A number of African-American

artists have referred to this trend as a continuation of the plantation system and mentality. (In the late 1800s European-American artists designed posters and broadsheets with derogatory images of African-Americans mocking the African-American community. Throughout the history of colonialism, slavery and white supremacy, words and images have been assigned to stereotype target groups, mocking them and designating them as less.²

Kara Walker utilises a silhouette made of black cut paper similar to the traditional Swiss-German technique called *scherensdnitte*, which was brought to the United States by the Pennsylvania Dutch in the 18th century. Walker cuts out the shapes of life-size figures placing them in various tableaux, for example: a slumped heavily drooping black musician is depicted being wound up, as if he is a mechanical toy, by a miniature or child-like "mammy" or Aunt Jemima figure. Above and in front of the slumped musician floats a child depicted as a "picaninny" with her legs open and the mouth of a trumpet inserted into her vagina.³

In general, Walker's subjects include stereotyped African-American men, women, and children often portrayed in demeaning postures. Sometimes they are barefoot, nude, defecating, and in some cases portrayed as child molesters and mutilators. She often exploits the "Topsy" or "picaninny" derogatory stereotype image. In her Renaissance Society exhibition in Chicago she portrayed an African-American child having intercourse with a horse. This is prettied up using a volumetrically cut simplified, "cute" silhouette. It is stylistically similar to something you might see in a Disney cartoon, but pornographic. In her book published by the Renaissance Society and underwritten in part by the Peter Norton Family Foundation and Lewis and Susan Manilow (her major collectors, funders and promoters) she drew the nude mammy-like image of an adult on the opposite page of an old engraving of an enslaved African man tied to a post and being whipped, by a smiling white male. The whipping is being watched by a relaxed and smiling white male. An enslaved African holds some of the ropes that bind the man being whipped. He appears to be smiling. The "mammy" image drawn on the opposite page has her legs wide open facing the engraving depicting the beating. Like the whites she also smiles. Her large open vagina has become a split watermelon with seeds.⁴

What is troubling and complicates the matter is that Walker's words in published interviews mock African-Americans and Africans. A work is titled "African't" She has said things such as "All black people in America want to be slaves just a little bit"⁵ and "in the cartoons where African savages are pictured, the European explorers are often placed at the mercy of savages."⁶ And "Afro-Am or African-American artists are always espousing the horrors of slavery and Gen-Afro Apartheid. . . . But horrors are always tolerable to repressed individuals to whom they may occur. This allows for a stronger sense of masochism in future generations, makes for riots, very colorful."⁷

Occasionally whites are portrayed as villains in Kara Walker's work. Walker

unconsciously or consciously seems to be catering to the bestial fantasies about black culture created by white supremacy and racism.

The following paragraph has been condensed from the original paper to continue the focus on Kara Walker: Michael Ray Charles, while claiming to be "exploding racial stereotypes" paints the derogatory "picaninny/sambo" image verbatim. Ellen Gallagher, utilizes disembodied stereotyped pop-eyes and thick lips as symbols detached from the full-bodied stereotype. Gary Simmons has used the negative stereotype in his early work, as have Fred Wilson, Carrie Mae Weems, Glenn Ligon, and James Montford. Betye Saar uses the stereotype but states she tries to "empower" avoiding "closet racism."⁸ (New York City-based European-American art galleries represent these artists who all utilise negative racial stereotypes.) As if on cue with the commercial sectors Robert Colescott, an artist known for his use of negative stereotypes was selected to be the United States representative to the Venice Biennale in 1997.

I feel it is tragic when black artists further "invigorate" the stereotype. Their work is, I fear, catering to racism, misogynistic at times, and self-loathing in both its subtle and grosser forms.⁹ Very few African-American artists with affirmative stereotype-busting images/messages are allowed in the same venues.¹⁰ I feel that artists who use racial stereotypes without critique become complicit. They are reinforcing the old stereotype as if to say the fabricated image is their true experience. Thus, in the visual industries' uneven playing field these artists entertain, titillate, mesmerise and amuse their European/European-American admirers. They become, as Kirsten Buick, museum lecturer in the Department of Education at the Art Institute of Chicago, states, a contemporary form of minstrelsy.¹¹ If those who speak out against it are silenced, ostracised, and censored, it is the same old white supremacy contract in new clothes.

"One of the tragic ironies of contemporary black life is that individuals succeed in acquiring material privilege often by sacrificing their positive connection to black culture and black experience."¹²

The artists who use negative stereotypes in turn attract cunning liberal supporters who feel good and "liberal" and mask their racism by vigorously supporting an African-American. According to Michael Harris, artist and professor of art history at University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, these supporters seem to eagerly push forward and fund these negative images in an attempt to persuade African-Americans to disregard history and see this as the most important work that should be seen and collected of African-American visual culture.¹³ Indeed these artists are being rewarded for mimicking the European-American artists who first created the negative stereotype image of African-Americans, Africans and other groups targeted for mocking.

Laura Cottingham critic and producer of the video documentary *Not for Sale: Feminism and Art in the USA during the 1970s* states: "So now the gallery and museum can feature art made by women which reproduces and upholds sexism

along with art by African-Americans that accepts the tenets of racism. Oh, I'm sure none of the artists I'm thinking of think they are doing this; but artists' intentions mean as little to me as the stated claims of the United States, which as we know, is a nation that stands for liberty and justice for all."¹⁴

Charles Mills in "The Racial Contract" explains the ability to produce and tolerate, among many things, stereotyped images as part of a "racial contract" or "White Supremacy agreement" that places and perpetuates power in the hands of the white power structure. He refers to it as a process of "consensual hallucination."

By virtue of their complete non-recognition or at best inadequate, myopic recognition . . . non-whites are relegated to the lower rungs on the moral ladders. They are designated as being born un-free and un-equal. . . . There will be white mythologies, invented Orients, invented Africas, invented Americas, with a correspondingly fabricated population . . . living in the white imagination and determinedly imposed on their alarmed real-life counterparts. One could say then, as a general rule, that white misunderstanding, misrepresentation, evasion, and self-deception on matters related to race are among the most pervasive mental phenomena of the past few hundred years, a cognitive and moral economy psychically required for conquest, colonisation, and enslavement.¹⁵

One wonders how many museums that show this work have shown and collected other African-Americans' work or works by other people of color.

Recently there has been a swift negative response from a number of African-American artists, art historians, and museum curators to the rapid embrace of Kara Walker and Michael Ray Charles.¹⁶ Although the protests are multi-generational, the other side insists that it is specifically, and only, older people who object. There has been, however, a muffled, restrained, fearful response from more conservative sectors of the African-American community, perhaps fearful because of the ostracism and trivialisation of those who object, by those behind the trend. In some cases, there has been opposition to the steadily growing network of protest by those who have had staunch European supporters. In the past some of these individuals have been reluctant to point to any disparity in the arts perhaps because of their fear of reprisals.

African Americans and European-American scholars attempting to correct the omissions of previous art critical and historical texts have often been attacked for their efforts. For example: *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics* by Ann Eden Gibson (Yale University Press, 1997) included over 33 African-Americans, people of color and women and was ferociously attacked by conservative art critic Hilton Kramer in *The New York Observer* (Sept. 8, 1997). He referred to her efforts as a "demolition job."

Various other strategies other than protest have been adopted by the African-American community including artists becoming art historians. These include David Driskell (University of Maryland), Richard Powell (Duke University, chairman of the Art History Department), Freida High (University of Wisconsin, Madison)

and Michael Harris (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill). Artists have also founded publications such as Samela Lewis's *International Journal of African American Art* published by the Hampton University Museum and *Artist and Influence*, founded by Camille Billops with her husband James Hatch. Together they also formed an archive of African-American achievements in the arts, the HatchBillops Collection, now part of the Emory University Art Archive. Additional publications that have sustained the African-American community include *Third Text* (London). Okwui Enwezor's *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* (Brooklyn, NY, *Atlanticus*, and *Diaspora News* (Brooklyn). Artists' groups formed to address the issues of omission, to lessen the isolation, and to formulate projects, such as The National Council of Artists, founded in 1959. Coast-to-Coast, a group of African-American, Asian-American, Latino, Native American women artists was formed in 1987 by Faith Ringgold, Clarissa Shigh and Magaret Gallegos. Entitled: Black Women Artists, organized in 1996. Asian artists faced with the same dilemmas have formed a group called Godzilla.

Since the current art world climate is most supportive of African-American artists who use negative stereotypes of African-Americans, their work is the most likely to be seen in American and international European art publications, I invited a number of artists not pursuing this approach to send me slides of their work for my talk in Johannesburg to show work that is being done independently or is being shown by African-American art dealers or European-American art dealers. Artists represented by African-American dealers and shown in African-American Museums or art galleries rarely, if ever receive wide acclaim, the exceptions being Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence, Martin Puryear, and David Hammonds.

In the Biennale presentation, I showed slides by the following artists placing them in various categories: **Installation:** Renée Green, Mildred Howard, Stephanie Johnson, Fred Wilson, Maren Hassenger, Houston Conwill, Adrian Piper, Carole Byard, Betye Saar, Randy Williams, David Hammonds. **Installation-painting:** Raymond Saunders. **Installation-sculpture/assemblage:** Leonardo Drew, Chakaia Booker, Kevin Sampson, Janet Henry, Renee Stout, Vladimir Cybil. **Sculpture:** Bessie Harvey, Elizabeth Catlett, Charles Searles, Allison Saar, Beverly Buchanan, Helen Ramsaran, Melvin Edwards, Tyrone Mitchell, Veronica Ryan. **Ceramic sculpture:** Martha Jackson-Jarvis, Sama Musasana, Syd Carpenter. **Photography:** Renée Cox, Lorna Simpson, Pat Ward Williams, Bill Gaskins, Carrie Mae Weems. **Painting-figurative:** Whitfield Lovell, Philemona Williamson, Kerry James Marshall, Richard Yarde, Emma Amos, Samella Lewis, Herbert Gentry, Shirley Woodson, Vincent Smith, Valerie Maynard. **Abstraction:** Sam Gilliam, Camille Brewer, Charles Burwell, Mary Lovelace O'Neal, Jack Whitten, Norman Lewis, Ed Clark, Nanette Carter, Allie Mc Gee, Carol Ann Carter, Carol Martin, Joe Overstreet, Al Loving, David Driskell. Candida Alvarez, Denyse Thomasos. These African-American artists work within varied idioms of visual possibilities including abstraction, autobiography, issue-oriented work—work that explores

various cultural traditions and utilises installation, photography, paintings drawing, assemblage, video and sculpture. Some use found objects such as rubber tyres, family memorabilia and popular culture sources such as advertising.

The ten artists selected for discussion were Carole Byard, Chakaia Booker, Maren Hassinger, Martha Jackson-Jarvis, Carolyn Martin, Valerie Maynard, Sana Musasama, Pat Ward Williams, Philemona Williams, and Helen Ramsaran.

—Howardena Pindell

The above essay is from a Conference Paper, "Trade Routes, History, Geography, Culture: Towards a Definition of Culture in the late-20th Century," presented at the Johannesburg Biennale, October 1997, updated with the following three postscripts dated January 2002, October 2007 and January 2009

Postscript, January 2002

Rasheed Araeen in his article "The Art of Benevolent Racism" in *Third Text* (London, Summer 2000) examines what he calls the "positive stereotype" which he feels is encouraged by "benevolent racism." The "positive stereotype" is the expectation that artists of color will create work about their ethnicity, therefore locating themselves outside of the mainstream, separate and different. The mainstream feels that it is not racist in encouraging and embracing the work, but if the mainstream embraces the work, it will not tolerate or acknowledge work by non-whites that is not ethnically based in difference. White artists, on the other hand, can create work which is avant-garde and addresses a wide range of issues.

The current situation, Araeen feels has increased in complexity as artists of color are up against both the white establishment as well as up against the new functionaries of color appointed to protect neo-colonial power and beliefs. In other words, artists of color are damned if they don't and damned if they do. The use of "negative stereotype" reproduces and perpetuates an "apartheid" imperialistic culture while the "positive stereotype" makes it look benign.

Postscript, October 2007

A Kara Walker one-person exhibition opened on October 11th 2007 at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City. There was a flurry of articles about her work in the conservative white art and non-art press including *The New Yorker* and *Art in America*. I was invited since I am not "pro" to be interviewed by the conservative newspaper, *The New York Sun* to take part in a web-based video about Kara Walker's work. The video was to include some of the people who support her work as well as those that question it. It is interesting to note that just before and after the opening of Kara Walker's exhibition there have been a series of bias/hate crimes at Columbia University where Kara Walker teaches, including a noose hung on the office door of another Black professor and swastikas drawn in a public bathroom. A Black sports team was scheduled to play in Staten Island, a predominantly white borough of New York, and someone had written the word

"nigger" across the benches where they were to sit. The Black team won the game anyway. An Indian man was beaten in his housing complex in New York. These kinds of occurrences highlight the sobering fact that racism is alive and active.

I wrote the following in preparation for *The New York Sun* video interview and feel that it clarifies my position since my presentation at the 1997 conference during the Johannesburg Biennial, ten years ago. I stand by what I said earlier and submit to you my new observations:-

1. Kara Walker's work is being used as a weapon against the Black community in general to reinforce and maintain restrictions upon any visual dialogue with other artists of color and the wide range of work they produce.

2. The powers behind her who fund her work represent a backlash of the same order as that of the U.S. conservative Congress that eliminated the funding for visual artists because of their use of sexually explicit material, their exploration of issues pertaining to homosexuality, their use of bodily fluids and emanations from the body such as urine and excrement (Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ*) as well as their exploration of political issues too thorny for the conservative Right wing. This backlash is also against civil rights achievements, the women's movement and the movement to expose the abuse of women and children because it uses exploitative images of women and children without a counter visual dialogue or any dialogue at all in the same arena.

3. The 2,000 pound elephant in the room is the pattern and practice of racism in the U.S. art world and the world in general. This includes white art dealers who wish to show non-whites being warned against it by other white dealers or being threatened. It includes the nearly white face of the staff in most U.S. cultural institutions. It includes the harassment of the few non-white staff who are employed by these institutions. It includes white staff in some cultural institutions objecting to their institutions being visited and utilized by non-whites. It includes the favoritism and lionization shown to artists of color who utilize negative racial stereotypes of their own people. It includes the refusal to fund and the ostracism of those who do not support this. It includes the active silencing or attempts to silence or open harassment of those who are critical of this situation and have a dissenting opinion and the stifling of dialogue with them unless the powers that be fund and control the discussion. It includes the open hostility, threats and retaliation faced by artists of color who work with issues seriously and directly such as slavery, lynching, etc. but who do not use negative racial stereotypes, flip irony or humor. It also includes the erasure or boycotting of the work of artists of color who do not deal with issues of race or identity.

Postscript, January 2009

In 1997–98 Betye Saar and I did separate mailings in reaction to Kara Walker's work and to her award of a MacArthur Grant. Betye sent out over 100 letters and I sent periodically, a listing of Walker's shows and asked people to see them and consider responding and offering feedback to the institutions. I received a very angry, professionally typed letter from a well-known African American male artist accusing me of being behind everything, although Betye and I were on different coasts and I had never contacted him. I wrote back telling him that I had a right to my opinion and independent action.

After delivering my paper *Diaspora/Realities/Strategies* during the conference of the 2nd Johannesburg Biennale in October 1997, on my return to the States, I received a condescending and violently aggressive phone call from an infuriated white female art critic. My paper had been about negative stereotypes used by some African-American artists and how the white art world seemed to readily accept them only if they created demeaning work using negative images of African-Americans. Two of the artists I discussed were Michael Ray Charles and Kara Walker. During the art critic's phone call, she aggressively questioned me about what I had said at the Biennale, even reprimanding me for refusing to join the pro-negative stereotype/ pro-Kara Walker band-wagon and for refusing to be a willing collaborator or to just remain silent. It was clear that she would not tolerate a two-way conversation involving verbal reciprocity. She was in effect trying to shout me down, to bully me into answering her questions and force me to accept her way of thinking. I am sure she was coasting on the assumed power of white privilege behind her and the "mighty power" of the art establishment. It was an anti-dialogue. Her attitude toward me was "what nerve—how dare she not buckle under."

When the Kara Walker's exhibition opened at the Whitney in the Fall of 2007 a young African-American man was inspired to open his own site at www.brandshire.com/ on which he said: "I left my thoughts on "Respond" blog for the 'exhibition's website.' Thank you Whitney for finally not censoring my posts" This implies that his earlier efforts had been censored. He also says "I'm leaving copies of the comments here as well. You can continue the discussion on my blogspotpage: <http://karawalkerexposed.blogspot.com/> Why do I care? Because I have no choice. Because I'm tired of being degraded and having my social existence circumscribed by the psychological terms of whiteness. I am doing this for my own sanity. Walker's work demands conversation. As an African-American man under 30, my personal reaction to Kara Walker's work is one of absolute disgust. As this work ultimately has direct multiple effects on my life, I believe the Whitney should allow for my voice to be heard and to print this critique. To silence a simple blog comment, as you've done with my previous post, is to render me as one of Walker's two-dimensional shadows, trapped within the nightmarish psychosis of white supremacist projections of blackness currently displayed on the Whitney's walls, completely raped of any

connection to historical humanity of the slaves Walker absolutely betrays. In almost every review of her work, all mention of protest is characterized as the by-product of a generational gap, between now-fusty 1960s social politics and the balanced reason of today's youth. Well, I am here to tell you that, unlike Allison Saar [Betye Saar's daughter who supports the work], I personally believe Kara's work carefully situates itself within the post-Civil Rights backlash against racial equality. It's a trick bag, occasionally adopting the rhetoric of "exposing" stereotypes for the sake of social justice, while at the same time further perverting these stereotypes for the tacit amusement of the predominantly white establishment . . ."

In browsing the web I noticed that Kara Walker was awarded a \$50,000 grant by one of her benefactors and supporters who is every-ready to keep her values high, USA Artists. This is a grant given by way of nomination, no application necessary and is funded by Eileen Norton, The Peter Norton Family Foundation. The January 2009 issues of *ARTnews* has a review of Tim Rollins and K.O.S.' of a work exhibited at Lehmann Maupin Gallery, New York, titled "Slave Girl." 2008 (Satin, ribbons, fabric paint, and book pages on canvas, actual painting is 84 x 108, overall size is 174 x 108 inches. It's a very beautiful piece, but the children's names are missing and they are lumped together, and like slaves they are nameless and faceless. If they were white children would this omission be noticed? [Rollins has been working with non-white students in the Bronx for years.] Years ago I spoke about this problem of omission of the young people's names with only the name of the white overseer mentioned and the children assumed to be "anonymous." Perhaps this was an error of the magazine? I had brought this issue up in an article in the *New Art Examiner* almost 15 years ago and years later I received an angry call from one of Tim Rollins' supporters who was writing a thesis about him accusing me of doing "Nothing for any one. What have you done for anyone?" adding I had no right to criticize Tim Rollins for omitting the children's names. I guess it's business as usual. Also, in the same issue there's an article by Ann Landis on an African-American performance artist/ sports figure, Shaun El C. Leonardo titled, "Wrestling with Masculinity." Sports is always an easy stereotype to fit African Americans into for the comfort of whites, avoiding those they cannot wedge into the stereotypical categories. Again, it's business as usual with a fairly wide range of work by white artists being exhibited and reviewed and African-Americans only allowed in if we fit the accepted stereotyped categories. On January's *Art in America* cover, there is a non-white, mixed race, South African artist, Robin Rhode who lives in Berlin. The article "Disappearing Acts" by Nancy Princenthal. is about a number of things concerning his complex works—a type of minstrelsy in black make-up for some works and white make-up on his hands playing the piano ("Keys," 2008.) In another piece he blackens his hands and his face, using music—primarily jazz. His work is complex, but I noted that there is the stereotype image, of the minstrel.

I think about the non-white individual who was harassed by white co-workers into quitting her job at a New York City non-profit organization in New

York City—not the South, and about young African-American artists turned away from galleries because their work does not cater to white fantasies. Then I think of a symposium/conference of feminists where, when my name came up, a white feminist “accused” me by saying “I did not know I was Black.”

If the subjects of other holocausts were explored or presented in this manner would the embrace from the art world be as warm?

—Howardena Pindell

¹ “Extreme Times Call for Extreme Heroes,” *The International Review of African American Art* (Stereotypes Subverted? or For Sale?), Hampton, VA, 14:3, 1997.

² Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992, p.29.

³ *Kara Walker, Kara Walker* Chicago: The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, 1997

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Jerry Salz, “Kara Walker; Ill-Will and Desire,” *Flash Art*, November/December, P.86, 1996.

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid. p.84. Also see “Extreme Times Call for Extreme Heroes,” *The International Review of African American Art* (Stereotypes Subverted? or For Sale?), 14:3 1997.

⁸ Ibid, “Extreme Times Call for Extreme Heroes,” p.10. Also see Bill Van Siclen, “Kara Walker’s Racial Images Under Fire,” *The Providence Sunday Journal*, May 10, 1998.

⁹ Ibid, May 10, 1998.

¹⁰ Howardena Pindell, *Heart of the Question* NY: Midmarch Arts Press, 1997,

¹¹ “Extreme Times Call for Extreme Heroes,” p.12

¹² bell hooks, *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*. NY: Henry Holt and Company, 1998, p.160.

¹³ Telephone conversation with Michael Harris, August 1998

¹⁴ Howardena Pindell, *Heart of the Question*, p.4

¹⁵ Charles W Mills, *The Racial Contract*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997, pp.18-19 I feel that this mind-set is also required for white supremacy to have continued its guilt free and remorse free enjoyment of ill-gotten profit from past generations of exploitation and also the present exploitation of others.

¹⁶ Four symposia have been held concerning negative racial stereotypes. Two were organized by Ed Spriggs, director Hammonds House, Atlanta, Georgia. “Stereotypes About Us By Us I” was held October 26, 1997 and “Stereotypes About Us By Us II” was held July 17, 1998. It was a “national debate with artists and cultural workers, on the use of derogatory images by Black artists.” A symposium was held in New York City at the American Museum of Folk Art December 10 1997. Harvard University held a symposium called “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke” at the Fogg Museum April 1998, during the Kara Walker exhibition at Harvard’s Carpenter Center. It was less a debate and more a public relations event for negative racial stereotypes. It was co-sponsored by Harvard’s W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for African-American Culture and funded by Kara Walker’s leading promoters/collectors/funders, Lewis Manilow and the Peter Norton Family Foundation. Manilow explained on a panel how he has promoted Walker’s work and personally arranged the show at Harvard, exhibiting the work that he owns. One white male panelist in response to an African-American artist’s comment from the audience that the symposium was an insult to the black community was told that it is backward and old-fashioned to care about the community (See Ronald Jones, “Crimson Herring: Slant Ronald Jones on “Black Kike Who?” *Artforum*, Summer 1998, p. 17 and Bill Van Siclen, “Kara Walker’s Racial Images Under Fire,” *The Providence Sunday Journal*, May 10 1998. In 1998 the Hampton University Museum published an issue of the *International Review of African American Art* which included commentary and reactions to the work of Michael Ray Charles and Kara Walker as well as a dialogue between Lowery Sims,

[then] 20th Century Curator at the Metropolitan Museum in New York and Michael Harris a professor of art history at the University of North Carolina, in Chapel Hill, concerning negative racial stereotypes in "fine art and popular culture."

WHY: KARA WALKER

Why? This is my dilemma when I view the work of Kara Walker. Who is the intended audience for this very complex work? It is not surprising that the work of Kara Walker with its convoluted mix of racial stereotypes and sexual fantasies projected on slave narratives of the ante-bellum South has found quite a large audience both in America and Europe. This young artist has enjoyed all of the accolades that the art world establishment can bestow on an artist and yet there is still controversy surrounding this work. Few in the art establishment have any desire to hear genuine criticism of Kara Walker's work. It is as though the quality of this work should never be called into question.

White America has never been held into account for the atrocities that were perpetrated against millions of slaves in this country. It was all quietly swept under the rug. 1994 ushered in Kara Walker's grotesque, pornographic and fantasy account of it all and suddenly made it hilarious, seductive and acceptable. White collectors tumbled all over themselves rushing out to buy a bit of this re-invented history. Again, I ask. Why? Why are stereotypes such as mammies, coons and piccaninnies so pleasing to whites especially when drawn and presented by a black artist. Is it perhaps because for these very same liberal whites, these images reaffirm their feelings of superiority?

These images are being bought and sold in much the same way that slaves were bought and sold. They have been hung on walls in many of the "finest homes of art collectors" in America and Europe in very much the same way that lawn jockey and darkies decorated the lawns of many of the "finest homes of the South." The work of Kara Walker is discussed in polite academic circles all over the country. But, the question that plagues me the most when I view these images is, "Do these grotesque, pornographic and fantasy images of slavery cause white Americans to feel intense pangs of guilt over the atrocities of slavery?" If not, why not? If not, what is the purpose of this work?

Is the audience for this work the African American community? If so, why would African American find pleasure in seeing images of their ancestors presented over and over as docile victims, mammies, coons and piccaninnies? These images have always been offensive to black Americans. Why should we embrace them now? There is a theory in academic circles that if negative racial stereotypes are repeated often enough they eventually lose their power to inflict pain. For me and many other African Americans, these images will always be disgusting, spiteful and mean. One would think that Walker's continually

dredging them up would engender feeling of guilt and shame in whites, instead whites acquire them like slaves while African Americans who attempt to voice their criticism of the work are often shouted down and marginalized by the art world establishment. Again, I ask, Why? Who benefits most from this?

—Helen Evans Ramsaran

HER SILHOUETTE AT THE CINEMA: PAINTED REFLECTIONS OF KARA WALKER

In May of 2002, an artist friend and I took an excursion to Ann Arbor to see "Pictures from Another Time," the latest installation by Kara Walker at the University of Michigan Museum of Art, and took the opportunity to listen to her lecture. For one reason or another I had never before seen the work of Kara Walker, and had only heard her name mentioned in art circles in which discourse about her work was often followed by frowns, dismissive teeth sucking and an occasional expletive. Needless to say, I was quite excited to see her work and happen upon my own conclusions and opinions concerning her imagery.

Upon entering the heavy doors of the museum I was exhilarated. Her exhibit occupied the entire first floor atrium of the museum. The grandeur of the exhibit was awe-inspiring. Before me a bevy of beautifully sculpted silhouettes, which seemed to be strung together in a never-ending trail of contour and edges lined the walls. . . . The attention to detail was phenomenal. Her sense of space reminded me of a Miles Davis composition, "circa Nefertiti." I had never before witnessed mark-making of such invention and reticence. I was seduced into a sustained intimate interaction with the eloquence of the silhouettes.

Inching closer to the wall I noticed the silhouette of a shackled young girl with exaggerated African facial features. I wondered if this was what had angered everyone? Upon further examination I find another image of a young girl with African features in flight, and in a moment of ecstasy as a large bird immersed its beak into her vaginal cavity. My brow furrowed. Panning over to another group of silhouettes, a young girl in tattered clothing cradled another young girl as she suckled her bare breasts. Another woman pinched her nipples and passively watched the scene. I hastily moved on to another silhouette, this time witnessing another young girl preparing her saliva for a session of oral pleasure with her male partner with European features. Elsewhere, another girl with pigtailed, legs made of wool and a skirt made of wire, suckles readily on her own tail. I realized that Walker had created images of enslaved Africans embroiled in graphically violent sexual activity with their white enslavers. Not only did the enslaved Africans have exaggerated features (large lips, swollen buttocks, etc.), they played the role of willing victims. Their captors were well dressed, stood tall and orchestrated the landscape of debauchery. I quickly scurried over to my friend and asked, "What the hell is this sh#t?!"

Prepared for the emotional upheaval of the audience that I knew was sure

to ensue, my friend and I wrote several questions in our sketchbooks, which we were certain would set the stage for a confrontation. As Walker approached her regal gait surprised me. She was taller than expected and held an air of sweetness. Her smile was pretty and her eyes moved across the room sharply. Walker had charisma and spirit. Had we been schoolmates, I would have befriended her and shared my colored pencils with her after school. She wasn't defiant, rude, loud, domineering, or nescient. How could this woman produce something so vile? Where was this lurking in her spirit?

Following her brief, uneventful lecture the audience was invited to ask Walker questions and offer comments. The majority middle-aged crowd of Anglo-European descent asked a litany of uninspired questions concerning Walker's technique, travels, gallery representation, and art-making process. My friend was finally called upon and asked Walker to comment on the reaction of African Americans to her work and the recent rejection of her work from an exhibit at the Detroit Institute of Arts.¹ Walker's response was akin to a graceful Brazilian performing Capoeira² around a swarming inferno. She offered an analogy and said she didn't know much about Detroit. Somehow she miraculously defused our fiery appetites for attack. Walker didn't flinch or seem unhinged, and we smelled no blood. The lecture was abruptly brought to a close and Walker was whisked into the crowd of hand shakers and back patters.

The ride home was ripe with protests to the ghastly exhibition that now burdened us with many questions. How could a mind of African descent create such horrid imagery with such reckless abandon? What did her family think? What did they say? What sort of conversations did they have? How did her closest friends of color react to her stardom considering the nature of her subject matter? Did they object? Were they disappointed? Where were her parents? Didn't they talk to Kara? Hadn't they explained to Kara the social implications that might lie ahead? Did they feel that their daughter was brave in some way or honestly confronting real issues? Why hadn't so many Black artists before her received the same attention from a wealthy speculative New York gallery owner or global art machine? Was it fair to pose these questions? Was there envy of her success? Were these feelings out of line?

Soon after this experience I painted my first reactionary document of the Kara Walker phenomenon entitled *Shock Corridor*, aptly named after the maverick director Samuel Fuller's pulp film from 1963. The film centers around a journalist, Johnny Barrett (played by actor Peter Breck), who in his quest of a Pulitzer Prize, has himself committed to a state mental institution to find out who killed Sloan, one of his patients. Johnny is driven to exude the truth by structuring his exploration of psychic damage and the hypocrisies of the American Dream as it relates to racism, anti-communism and the threat of nuclear terrorism. In the film, Johnny is readily flanked by his stripper girlfriend, Cathy (played by actress Constance Towers), who warns him of the danger of his scheme and the

self-defeating nature of his passionate yet doomed ambition to safely infiltrate a world of madness.

Thoroughly sculpting his fictitious insanity, Johnny claims that Cathy is his sister with whom he tried to have sex. Once he has given his doctors the slip he proceeds to investigate the murder of Sloan, discreetly interviews his fellow inmates and finds that of course, they are insane. Eventually Johnny is attacked by a group of nymphomaniacs, placed in a straightjacket and forced to undergo shock treatment. He certainly wins his Pulitzer Prize after all, when he finally discovers that Sloan's killer is Wilkes, a hospital attendant, whose motive arose from the need to suppress the disclosure of his sexual relations with some of the female patients. However, the sacrifice of sanity has been too much for Johnny as he suffers a mental collapse and is returned to the institution.

In my painting, I chose the prominent artist and philosopher Adrian Piper to play the role of Cathy, with Walker as Johnny. Playing a seminal role in the emergence of conceptual art in the 1960s and 1970s, and a central role in the development of identity-based art in the 1980s and 1990s, Piper's art served as a frontispiece framework for confrontational objects, installations, performances, videos and sound works that prohibit the spectator's retreat from art centered around issues of race, bigotry, gender utopia, difference and xenophobia.³ I first became endeared to the work of Adrian Piper as a college student when my mother shared stories with me about Piper's "My Calling (Card)" series from the late 1980s. The child of an interracial couple, Piper's complexion made her privy to the racist comments made by those of Anglo-European descent whose racism is comforted when they feel they are in a social setting devoid of persons of color. When confronted by racist or bigoted comments, Piper would hand the culprit a card that might read as follows:

Dear Friend,

I am black

I am sure you did not realize this when you made/laughed at/agreed with that racial remark. In the past, I have attempted to alert white people to my racial identity in advance. Unfortunately, this invariably causes them to react to me as pushy, manipulative, or socially inappropriate. Therefore, my policy is to assume that white people do not make these remarks, even when they believe there are no black people present, and to distribute this card when they do.

I regret any discomfort my presence is causing you, just as I am sure you regret the discomfort your racism is causing me.

Sincerely yours,

Adrian Margaret Smith Piper

At the time in my young life it was the most brilliant idea that I had ever heard. I was astonished by the sheer innovation of Piper as she was immediately ranked in my personal list of great artists.. Most intriguing was her interest in

investigating the racialized personal communication between artist and audience in a manner that was direct, clear, plain, candid, undisguised and true. Piper's finessed approach was as subtle and intransigent as racism has grown since the end of Jim Crow.⁵

Seated in *Shock Corridor*, Adrian Piper becomes aware of the spectator's presence as she attempts to counsel Kara Walker, warning her of the dangers of immersing herself into the depths of art superstardom. I intended to portray a clandestine meeting between an elder artist, one who has ensured that her privatized racial dichotomies addresses the viewer's ethical responsibilities and larger social accountability as it pertains to their own prejudice, and a young, seemingly precocious artist who has set out to investigate the psychological underpinnings of her own mental enslavement by means of celebration and self-indulgence. Walker holds a small jar of black makeup and Piper begins the process of giving Kara a cosmetic facial. At this point in my career I was adding generous amounts of text to paintings so that they read as magazine captions. I created captions that I felt could stand as headlines to articles reporting this meeting:

"How to push the envelope and still fit inside it."

"Presenting A STRAIGHTFORWARD, NO-NONSENSE COMAPARISON"

"IT ENDED WITH A MERGER OF GIANTS"

"BEHIND ALL THE BLATHER"

"truly, the good thing is great minds don't think alike"

"WHY THE HECK DIDN'T SOMEONE THINK OF THIS BEFORE?!"

"A load of trouble for Texas border towns"

I imagine that Piper sees Walker as a victim, complicit in her own abasement, content with her life as a famous artist paralleling the life of a slave for her white lovers, dealers, patrons and loving critics. Piper intends to create art objects that are fresh and new, complete with an un-prescribed aesthetic experience steeped in a phenomenological approach, disengaged from the racist stereotypes and clichés of the media world.⁷ Thus, Piper often searches for ways to usurp the viewer's attention and make the art object as user-friendly as possible by demanding that the viewer rely on their own personal memories and stories to engender empathy.⁸

Unlike Piper's approach, Walker's art capitalizes on a very old media portfolio of racist imagery that is familiar and convenient. Walker's art perverts the black image, pandering to the amusement of a predominately white art establishment. By conducting a cosmetic facial, Piper seeks to bring clarity to Walker's clouded rage, extracting an understanding of the human condition that Walker's art sorely lacks.⁹

Seeking a more in-depth intrapersonal discussion and rendition of Walker's art, I set out to make another painting two years later (2004) entitled *That Obscure Object of Desire*, after the great Spanish director, Luis Bunuel's film of the same name. In the film, Bunuel investigates the perversity of human desires and our orchestrated propensity to inhibit the satisfaction of those avaricious passions. Made in 1977 as Bunuel approached the age of eighty, the story centers around Mathieu (played brilliantly by actor Fernando Rey), an ageing but wealthy aristocrat, who pursues the erotic pleasures of the much younger woman, Conchita (played by two actresses, Carole Bouquet and Angela Molina), through a series of flashbacks of amorous encounters in which she arouses his desire, but denies his sexual satisfaction.¹⁰ In the painting, Kara Walker sprawls across the seat of a small couch and rests her head in the lap of the artist Elizabeth Catlett. Catlett's work as a sculptor focuses on the philosophical and contextual aspects of race, progressive feminist politics, cross-cultural identity and the preservation of traditional familial structures. The lack of access and the denial of the contributions of African Americans in written histories has also been of importance in Catlett's art. During the late 1930s and 1940s Catlett's socially committed works depicted the embrace between mother and child, as well as her portraits of laborers often exploited and betrayed in the labor market, were quite viable in the United States. As the artistic climate began to shift in the mid-1940s Catlett moved to Mexico and aligned herself with the artists of the Taller de Grafica Popular, who were dedicated to the social and political ideals set forth during the Mexican Revolution. Her work evolved again in the 1960s as the Black Arts Movement emerged in response to the dramatic social changes brought about as a result of the Civil Rights Movement. Her work found a new audience again within the Feminist Movement in the two decades that followed. Catlett, during each stage of development, was able to effectively accommodate her intent and artistic approach so that neither was sacrificed amidst the ever-evolving social and political environments, home and abroad.¹¹ This greatly inspired me to include Catlett in my painting as the teacher and healer of Walker. To the right, behind the couch stands singer, songwriter and musician Me'shell NdegéOcello. NdegéOcello stares out at the viewer with a confrontational pose, brandishing a large silver handgun. Born Michelle Lynn Johnson at birth, she adopted the surname NdegéOcello, meaning "free like a bird" in Swahili, while still in her teens. NdegéOcello's music blurs the lines of sexuality and musical genres. A proud German-born, African American, bisexual, female rock star, NdegéOcello poses a threat to the status quo of the popular music industry. Veering away from the artistic framework and pathways of creating musical product for the promise of commercial success, her music explores more philosophical themes of duality, contradiction, religion, politics, poverty, experimentation, race and sexuality. Like Walker's art, sex and power,

dominance and submission, admission and repression are inextricably knotted and connected to one another. Yet, NdegéOcello's journey through the pantheon of her own personal conundrums, enlighten the listener and reveals a healthy understanding of the human condition. Walker's excursion, in stark contrast, seems debilitating to artist and viewer. The lyrics of NdegéOcello's song "Soul On Ice"¹² from her album "Plantation Lullabies" seem to speak to Kara Walker, as they serve as NdegéOcello's personal dialogue over her own self-image and culture as a person of African descent:

We've been indoctrinated and convinced
By the white racist standard of beauty
The overwhelming popularity of seeing
Better off being, and looking white
My brothers attempt to defy
The white man's law and his system of values
Defiles his white woman, but my, my, Master's in the slave house again
Visions of her virginal white beauty dancin' in your head
Your soul's on ice
Your soul's on ice . . .

Konks and fade creams sad passion deferred dreams
I am a reflection of you
Black and blue pure as the tears of coal-colored children crying for
acceptance You can't run from yourself
She's just an illusion
Black love anthems play behind white-skinned affection
New birth stereophonic Spanish fly let her cry
But you no longer burn for the motherland brown skin
You want blonde-haired, blue-eyed soul
Snow white passion without the hot comb¹³

NdegéOcello grew up feeling ashamed about the way she looked. Her mother, lighter skinned and with antiquated values, endowed NdegéOcello with a great sense of ineptness and resentment because she didn't possess the complexion and hair type her mother most valued. Even as an adult her mother would often tell her to keep her son out of the sun to keep him from getting too dark.¹⁴ Playing a supporting role in my painting, Me'shell acts as a sentry, or guard for Catlett, warding off any potential intruders or unwanted parties in this intervention of her tortured 'sister'. Walker is dancing, running amok in her own 'darkness' without appropriate supervision and NdegéOcello has come to help lead her to salvation.

Also behind the couch, next to NdegéOcello stands an interpretation of an apparition plucked from master film director Stanley Kubrick's 1980 horror film

The Shining. This figure wearing a teddy bear/boar suit was originally seen by the frantic Wendy Torrance (played by Shelley Duvall) when she 'shined'¹⁵ for the first time amidst the distorted memories living inside of the haunted labyrinth, the Overlook Hotel. As she journeyed through the hotel during the film's climax, Wendy witnessed a grotesque mascot-like figure with a piggish snout and fangs, performing an act of fellatio on a gentleman in a white tie and tails.¹⁶ In my work this figure signified a possible 'mascot' of Walker's akin to Kanye West's teddy bear,¹⁷ a representative of sorts. Perhaps Walker imagined this type of haunting ghost as she prepared to thrust herself in the creative throws of artistic debauchery and hedonism. I also felt it necessary to include this 'mascot' and NdegéOcello in the painting as partners, both willing and unwilling, and witnesses to this exorcism and attempted redemption of Kara Walker's soul. Draping the naked bodies of Walker and Catlett in a very colorful quilt, inspired by the works of artists at Gee's Bend¹⁸ and an elegant bed sheet made of lace, I connected the two women in an intimate position. Walker lies with her head in Catlett's lap, to testify and confess her inability to properly process the stamp of her own physical and psychological encounters with race, identity and sexuality. This composition acts as a film still from a cineaste of my own design where Catlett, as the oracle, *lays hands*¹⁹ on Walker, whose emaciated body lies vulnerable, with a gaze transfixed on the presence of the viewer. In fact Catlett, NdegéOcello and Walker seem to readily freeze for the camera, possibly in between takes or even at the behest of myself, the director. Interestingly enough, at the time this painting was created I was quite unsure about the statement, direction and nature of this subject matter. Was I questioning my own perspective? Were my actors unclear about their own objectives in their respective roles? Moreover, only the mascot figure ignores my attention, perhaps defying my will. Was he really Walker's partner? Was NdegéOcello unable to stop his intrusion? Was he the symbol of Walker's disintegrating soul? Or was this beast perhaps present only to bid farewell to Walker, his meager host?

I created more captions that I felt could stand as headlines to articles reporting this meeting:

"BEAH R."²⁰

"WHITE IN WINTER"

"SO OBSCURE BELOVED DESIRE"

"ESCAPE FROM"

"WHAT MAKES A WOMAN SEXY"

"Make over America"

"Moving Forward, But Still Behind"

"Scarlet Suits You"

Framed faux Kara Walker paintings adorn the wall behind the figures, perhaps a fictitious series of small works intended to grace the home of a God fearing African American family. Admittedly, I actually censored my own desires for these works, as they were originally intended to be much more visceral and emotionally unsettling. I found it was actually too uncomfortable to recreate these sorts of ill-fated visions of race, history and sexuality. This made my disappointment in the artistic choices of Walker even that much more profound and unsettling.

In the first two works depicting Walker, I hadn't yet satisfied the intention to create an accurate physical depiction of the artist. As I grew as an artist I began to recognize new aspects of my formal technique and skill that required attention, honing and clarity. I settled on the idea of creating a quaint portrait of Walker that would allow me to improve my ability to create a more carefully modeled rendition of a human figure. Previously, I had always held the contention (and I probably still do) that the role of the figurative painter was to capture the crux, or quintessence of the figure's spirit. Despite the fact that this idea lived in great opposition to the realistic approaches of some of my artist heroes such as Phillip Pearlstein, Wayne Thiebaud and Hughie Lee Smith, whose work I readily examined, I often ignored the finer descriptive details of the figure's more personal characteristics and signifying marks, concentrating on the figure's individual presence and meaning in the composition. In this painting, however, a more realistic representation of Kara Walker was created. The work *Trouble in Paradise*, was titled after German director Ernst Lubitsch's 1932 film of the same name. Using titillation instead of shock, Lubitsch relies on the viewer's imagination to create a framework for enjoying this sexual comedy, while serving the watcher's eye with discreet visual metaphors to describe all things improper, base, illicit, exotic, and perverse during Hollywood's pre-Code era.²¹ Lubitsch intended to carefully avoid any tendency to be shocking or literal about sex, as Gaston Monescu and Lily (played by Herbert Marshall and Miriam Hopkins) navigate through their own sexually enlightened and whimsical romantic triangle in an effort to trick a rich perfume magnate's widow, Madame Mariette Colet (played by Kay Francis), of all of her loot.

Naked and donning a pink neon Kangol cloche,²² Walker smiles wryly at the viewer while standing in front of a fresh, yet incomplete, cut silhouette of black paper. Embroidered into her hat, just above the brim, is the title 'ESB: BIG SAM & LIL BO.' 'ESB' stands for the name of musical group, The Eastside Boyz, which includes rappers Big Sam and Lil Bo, one of hip-hop music's most notable acts. The Eastside Boyz also serves as a stage support for the Grammy Award winning rapper and producer, Lil' Jon. Lil' Jon (played by Jonathan Smith) is a pioneer of "crunk" music.²³ Often wearing gold teeth, gold chains and large sunglasses (reportedly to hide recessed eyes), Lil' Jon screams base, easily recited lyrics in concert, while also holding a platinum or gold diamond studded 'pimp'

cup or chalice. Needless to say, Lil' Jon more than fits the mold of a modern day minstrel or caricature of a young black male performer. He shows his teeth quite often in promotional photographic media, further cultivating the more negative aspects of hip hop imagery.

Like Walker's images of African Americans, Lil' Jon's image is highly mediated and clown-like, intentionally undermining the revolutionary effects of more honest, even positive facades of pioneering rappers like A Tribe Called Quest, De La Soul, Public Enemy, Queen Latifah and The Fugees. In a typical De La Soul music video the group may be shown boarding a city bus, washing clothes at a laundromat, or eating from a bowl of cereal at the kitchen table. Walking throughout the majority of their music videos, A Tribe Called Quest was seen in constant movement, continuously transforming and developing as their music evolved. Groups such as these attempted to mold new, untainted forms of the black image, shaped by the more banal, universal aspects of human existence. A typical Lil' Jon video is filled with scantily clad women, an abundance of exposed gold teeth and perpetual jump cuts from one Sambo reincarnation to the next. Lil' Jon's image is openly corrupted and capitalizes on the stereotypical black image by reconstructing it in modern day popular regalia. As the work emerged I explored the idea of Walker listening to hip hop music and enjoying music videos. Certainly she would love Lil' Jon and The Eastside Boyz. Their intent to modernize exploitive imagery and racist textual encoding does nothing more than reinforce negative stereotypes of Black men clowning, grinning, dancing and concealing handguns in their sagging trousers.. By wearing her hat Walker represents the diminishment of self to the fullest.

Serving as a walking billboard and perpetuating the subtle, coded language of the modern day minstrel in popular hip hop culture, Walker, in *Trouble in Paradise*, wears her embroidered Kangol proudly. In the tradition of Lubitsch's film, Walker's pro bono advertisement of black male performer as minstrel and welcoming nudity are coyly hinted at and not overstated. I thought that maybe she created her art in the nude and had been interrupted by the viewer who has arrived to enjoy a private sexual appointment.

These references to film, music and other visual artists were important because they allowed me to examine the ways in which other genius's creative minds had tackled issues of race, identity and sexuality in their art. So many of the characters found in the films paralleled the dynamism of Kara Walker—Johnny and his doomed plans for stardom, Wendy being shocked by her horrific visions, and Mathieu's desires to appease his base sexual cravings from a woman with multiple identities. I tried to couple her with artists who, like Walker, had also attempted to make sense of their own racial and sexual identities, yet had maintained a code of creative ethics grounded in highly intellectual tastes. These artists allowed for their visions of the uncanny to be rooted in a physical reality not bound by the infantile and neurotic mechanisms of the imagination.²⁴

In retrospect, I feel that I was quite naïve in my response to Walker. I was never angry, nor hateful towards her work, only disappointed, saddened and diminished as a result. However, I felt hopeful that my artistic heroes would swoop down and rescue Walker from her own demons. I felt that her art offered an opportunity to save her humanity, possibly justifying her art as a part of a transformative experience. Maybe one day she would make art like Aaron Douglas, or paint beautiful black faces like Samella Lewis. Maybe in my next painting I would paint her taking notes and listening attentively to Kerry James Marshall at a lectern, dissecting the true meaning of "SOB. SOB.",²⁵ teaching Walker about the perils of her love affair with the white supremacist imagination. Walker would be clothed in a neutral gray blouse and an unbleached white linen skirt. A thought bubble would appear above Walker's head, encasing the faces of Lois Mailou Jones, Barbara Chase Riboud and Howardena Pindell, the words "Didn't I See Her Crying?" uttering from their lips. On the wall of the Victorian interior hangs a portrait of Betye Saar brandishing a rifle and an American flag. I would call it "She's Gotta Have It."

In Spike Lee's first feature-length film (*She's Gotta Have It*, 1986), Nola Darling (portrayed by Tracy Camilla Johns) juggles her sexual relationships with three different men. Nola's primary struggle is her yearning to establish herself as the primary authority of her own soul and seeks to do so by using her body to control the souls of men. But Nola becomes ove-sexed, at one point even exploring a sexual relationship with her lesbian friend, and committing herself to psychiatric therapy. Eventually Nola realizes that in order to save herself she must become more than a 'negress' whose identity is based solely in her ability to provide men with delicious sex. She finds that she has been the true slave in her relationships and that her freedom can only be found through her redefinition of self. Walker is my Nola, or so I wish.

Many questions remain for me. How could anyone be rewarded from viewing sodomy, rape, torture, death, coprophagia and fellatio over and over again? There is a duality at play with a subject matter that has no duality. It's incomprehensible how I, as a person of color, can enjoy images depicting the bondage and enslavement of my own people in such inhumane form. Walker's imagery seems to satirize a bevy of helpless 'dark' victims being raped and tortured while traveling down a series of corridors, paths, and tunnels toward a waiting death. What can be gained from reinventing negative black stereotypes? How would the art world have responded if all of Walker's victims were Anglo and the enslavers were of African descent? Would she have been so overwhelmingly applauded for her work? Or would critics have called it "pre-approved heroic imagery of Black Power, . . . art-world irony"?²⁶

There is content, but there is no meaning. An ill-informed white gallery director once claimed that Walker is "talking about issues that have never been discussed before."²⁷ These issues have been discussed before at length, but for

so long the predominant culture has not been interested in engaging in the dialogue. Only when black imagery has resembled white depictions of people of color have large numbers of white art critics and patrons jumped into the fray to discuss race in America. Many whites have participated the Walker dialogue because they can see in her work an image, a stereotype that is more consumable, rooted in our memories, published in textbooks, seen on film and collected in our homes. Walker's work strengthens the white supremacist imagination, perpetuating the prevailing contemporary question of many whites as it pertains to race: "If Black people can call each other nigger, then why can't I?"

I don't know if I will ever make another work in response to Kara Walker's art. My responses to her work may be complete. In a recent exhibition,²⁸ Walker showed an enormous text installation in response to the recent American empirical military occupation of Iraq and violent actions in the Middle East. My initial thought was that Walker may be showing a sign of growth, artistically, personally and professionally. But Walker is bound by the confines of her stardom and must commodify her art. The installation was still flanked by her signature work of Anglos committing atrocities against those of African descent. One of the primary purposes of making art is to engage in a process of continual transformation, bound by time, age and the persistence of memory. Artists evolve from the experience of presenting their work and assessing its critical reception from both audience and the artist themselves. Yet, Walker seems to be a prisoner of her own discourse, obscured by her own concept of her "mediated black body."²⁹ She has type cast herself in her own film, but has seemingly lost creative control over the production. When will our dear Kara grow? When will she begin writing a new episode? When will this season end? When will she produce a spin-off with a different subject matter? Walker said that she could create this type of imagery for as long as she is black.³⁰ My remaining question is: When will she be white?

— Senghor Reid



Shock Corridor, 24 x 72, acrylic, 2003



That Obscure Object of Desire, 48 x 72, acrylic, 2004



Trouble in Paradise, 14 x 18, acrylic, 2005

- ¹ Kara Walker's print titled "A Means to an End: A Shadow Drama in Five Acts", was rejected from a show in 1999 at the Detroit Institute of Arts (Mazzei, 2006).
- ² Capoeira is an Afro-Brazilian art form that combines music, athletic movements and martial arts. Originally practiced by African slaves who were shipped to Brazil by the Portuguese, the traditional martial arts movements were set to music and disguised to look like a dance. Various movements include acrobatic play, feints, foot sweeps, kicks, slaps, punches and body throws. It has since become a social event and one of the fastest growing martial arts in the world (Redcross & Redcross, 2006, p. 433)
- ³ Maurice Berger, Adrian Piper: A Retrospective (Baltimore: U of Maryland, 1999)
- ⁴ Berger 30
- ⁵ Berger 19.
- ⁶ Peter Schjeldahl, "Walk This Way," *Village Voice* 2 June 1998:174.
- ⁷ Berger 24.
- ⁸ Berger 25.
- ⁹ Howard Halle, "Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love," *Time Out New York* 25-31 Oct. 2007. 7.
- ¹⁰ William Rothman, rev. of *That Obscure Object of Desire*, dir. Luis Bunuel, DVD. Criterion, 2001: 3-5.
- ¹¹ Lowery Stokes Sims, "Elizabeth Catlett: A Life in Art and Politics", Elizabeth Catlett Sculpture A Fifty-Year Retrospective, ed. Lucinda H. Gedeon (Purchase: Neuberger Museum of Art, 1998) 11-15.
- ¹² For a sampling of the song, see Me'shell NdegéOcello, *Plantation Lullabies*, Maverick, 19 Oct. 1993.
- ¹³ NdegéOcello, *Plantation Lullabies*..
- ¹⁴ Ernest Hardy, "Darkness Audible An Interview with Me'shell NdegéOcello", *LA Weekly* 10-16 Sept. 1999.
- ¹⁵ Wendy's ability to "shine" enables her to read thoughts, to locate missing objects, and to "see" things from both the past and the future. Explained in Thomas Allen Nelson, Kubrick: Inside a Film Artist's Maze (Bloomington: Indiana U P, 2000) 198-199.
- ¹⁶ Nelson 224-225.
- ¹⁷ Controversial hip hop rapper and producer Kanye West uses an image of a teddy bear to serve as his trademark and mascot.
- ¹⁸ The Gee's Bend Quilters Collective consists of women from small rural communities in Rehoboth and Boykin, Alabama.
- ¹⁹ The laying of hands is a religious practice used in many religions throughout the world for a variety of purposes such as: confirmation, ordination of church officers, invoking the Holy Spirit, blessings, healings, consultation, commissioning missionaries, and anointing of sovereigns.
- ²⁰ Refers to the late actress Beah Richards (1920-2000), who played many pivotal matriarchal roles in theatre and film in the 1950s and 1960s. She also served as a matriarchal figure and mentor for other black thespians and artists until her death from emphysema in 2000. I felt that the memory of Richards should be present in my painting as another healing component for

Kara Walker.

- ²¹ Refers to films created in the United States of America before the Motion Picture Production Code (Hays Code) of 1934 took effect. Films of the late 1920s and early 1930s often ignored existing codes and included many overt and subtle references to sexual promiscuity, illegal drug use, abortion, profanity, miscegenation, prostitution, and homosexuality.
- ²² The Kangol clothing company, famous for its headwear, was founded in Cleator, Cumbria, England in 1938 and was the major beret suppliers to the armed forces during World War II. In the 1980's Kangol berets were worn by popular members of the hip hop community and regained their popularity. Popular in the 1920's, the cloche (the French word for bell) is a fitted, bell-shaped hat created by Caroline Reboux. The hat is often made of felt to conform to the head and is designed to be worn low over the forehead to act as a visor for the eyes. Different styles of ribbons and/or emblems are affixed to the hats to indicate different messages about the wearer.
- ²³ Crunk music is a sub-genre of hip hop music which fuses Bounce Music, Disco Music, Southern hip hop and Bass Music.
- ²⁴ Sigmund Freud, "The 'Uncanny'", *Collected Papers*, (New York: Basic Books, 1959) 368-407.
- ²⁵ Kerry James Marshall's 2003 painting "SOB, SOB" depicts a young Black woman seated mournfully at the top of a staircase in a home. On the floor in front of her sits a book titled "Africa Since 1413" referencing the year 1413 when Prince Henry the Navigator of Portugal organized his first expedition to Africa, launching a flood of European invasions into Africa's interior lands.
- ²⁶ Jerry Saltz, "An Explosion of Color, in Black and White: Kara Walker's silhouettes don't just broach America's touchiest subject—they detonate it", *New York Magazine* 1 Nov. 2007: 97.
- ²⁷ "Stereotypes Subverted?", *International Review of African American Art*, 15 1998
- ²⁸ Walker displayed work from her series "Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands – Records, 'Miscellaneous Papers' National Archives M809 Roll 23" (named after the historical records of the "Freedmen's Bureau" that document atrocities against freed Blacks during Reconstruction) in a solo exhibition at Sikkema Jenkins & Co., a contemporary art gallery, in New York City in October and November in 2007.
- ²⁹ Ariella Budick, "Review: Kara Walker at the Whitney Museum," *Newsday.com*, 2007, *Newsday Inc.* 14 Oct. 2007.
- ³⁰ Hilton Als, "Profiles, The Shadow Act: A Kara Walker Retrospective", *The New Yorker*, October 8, 2007, p. 70.

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WHO IS THE AUDIENCE?

I had occasion to view Kara Walker's film "8 Possible Beginnings or: The Creation of Africa-America, Parts 1-8, A Moving Picture," with my daughter Katherine, who was 15 at the time. This was the first opportunity available to share Walker's work with Kate, and I was very interested to hear her response to this very provocative narrative. I have never hidden anything from her, making sure that our dialogues were age appropriate. She has been raised in the Metropolitan Detroit art world, hanging out in galleries and exhibition spaces since her birth. Because of her very developed eye I value her opinions when she views my work. She has the all of the ingenuousness of a young girl but is wise beyond her years, which people tell me is because her parents are older.

As we viewed the group show that included the film, she critiqued each piece that we saw together with a steady, discerning eye. Dialogue flowed back and forth between us. I often times wish that she would follow my footsteps and go into the arts in some way . . . maybe I have a budding historian or critic in my midst! Her interests are taking her in the direction of studying Asian languages. She tells me about the beauty of Japanese characters, and has immersed herself in the culture. In the last year or so she has become much more sensitive to innuendo and subtlety in the narratives of the Japanese films she has been watching, so I was curious what her response would be when we got to the Walker work, sat down on the bench and began to watch. I had some apprehension because I am very familiar with the work, so there was a slight tugging in my psyche . . . should I let her see it? Should I censor? Was she ready? My reticence stemmed from being familiar with the rawness of the sexuality in previous works. I came to the conclusion that since she was 15 and not 5, I would share this work with her.

My curiosity was palpable as she watched the silhouettes and puppets on sticks..after all, many others had offered their thoughts. At this point I must say that Walker's work has always disturbed me. This film/ animation / puppet show was Walker's interpretation of the black experience in America. My history, my emotions, my being a woman artist of color having had studied much of this history, and living with an older generation who related the actual narrative as experienced first-hand make me feel that Walker was trivializing the pain of many. The 'comedy' was misplaced. The satirical aspects were lost in the blatantness of the stereotypes. The shock value was overwhelming and

disturbing.

I was interested in seeing if my daughter, the curious young person that she is, could offer me some insight that might help me to fathom the murky mists of this work. I couldn't wait to hear what she had to say.

BACKSTORY:

SHE HAS BEEN OFFERING A CRITICAL EYE TO MY PAINTINGS SINCE SHE COULD TALK. . . .

GROWING UP IN MY STUDIO, WATCHING ME PAINT, WATCHING ME AGONIZE, SHE WOULD APPROACH WITH A TIPPED HEAD AND SAY, "DON'T USE THAT SHAPE, MOMMY, . . . OR "MOMMY THERE IS TOO MUCH RED."

AS SHE GOT OLDER HER COMMENTS TOOK ON THE ATTITUDE OF THE PRECOCIOUS PRE-TEEN (MOM, THE PAINTING IS NOT 'THERE' YET).

AND THEN THE YOUNG WOMAN WITH NEW-FOUND HIGH SCHOOL SOPHISTICATION (MOTHER, THE WORK HAS NO BALANCE).

AND SHE WAS ALWAYS RIGHT. OF COURSE MY ART-SCHOOL TRAINED EGO TOOK A HIT, BUT I QUICKLY REALIZED THAT HER COMMENTARY HAD NO AGENDA OTHER THAN EXCELLENCE.

Back to the gallery—

We are sitting on the bench, watching the Walker animation. There is an unusual silence between us. I was occupied with two things—the animation itself, and her response to it.

She watched with a rather blank face, and then she got up to go. I asked her why. She said that she didn't think it was made for her. That was it. I thought that at least she would ask questions about the history being referred to, or the satire, or the prurient nature of the images and narrative. Nothing.

Then I got a sense that she might have been embarrassed to watch fellatio and other sexual acts with her mother present. . . . Had our roles reverted back to being Mom and Daughter, instead of two well-informed gallery goers, two critical thinkers? But no . . . we have discussed topics that were in this vein before. We have examined issues of sexuality and personal relationships as they related to her stages of development; straightforward talks, with an emphasis on reality, no cute euphemisms to mask the truth. She has never been apprehensive about offering a critique or commentary. I had questions that I wanted to ask her, about this work, but the dialogue was over. Her only comment being that she didn't feel the work was made for her. Then the question arises, who is this work for? Who does it speak to? The testimony of her silence told me that she was not comfortable being the intended audience.

BACKSTORY:

WHEN SHE WAS ABOUT 4 YEARS OLD, I TOOK KATE ON A VISIT TO THE DETROIT INSTITUTE OF ARTS. AS WE ROAMED THE GALLERIES, I WAS TICKLED TO HEAR HER COMMENTS ON THE ART AND ARTIFACTS IN THE VARIOUS GALLERIES. SHE WAS BOISTEROUS, ANIMATED, AND INTERESTED IN EVERYTHING.

AS WE ENTERED THE CONTEMPORARY GALLERIES, THOUGH, SHE STOPPED DEAD IN HER TRACKS. BEFORE I HAD A CHANCE TO ASK HER WHAT WAS WRONG, SHE FLUNG HER ARMS OUT AND BROKE OUT IN A ROUSING RENDITION OF "TAKE ME OUT TO THE BALLGAME," SUNG AT THE TOP OF HER LUNGS, WITH BODY LANGUAGE TO ILLUSTRATE THE "ONE, TWO, THREE STRIKES YOUR'E OUT" PART. IT WAS HILARIOUS AND WONDERFUL, AND THE PEOPLE WHO WERE IN THE GALLERY AT THE TIME SMILED AND OFFERED APPLAUSE WHEN SHE HAD FINISHED HER "PERFORMANCE."

THE STIMULUS FOR HER SONG WAS THE HUGE ROBERT MOSKOWITZ *Hard Ball III*, WHICH DEPICTED A GIANT BASEBALL BEING THROWN INTO THE VIEWER'S SPACE, WITH THE SILHOUETTE OF THE PITCHER IN THE BACKGROUND. I LIKE TO OFFER THIS ANECDOTE TO MY ART HISTORY STUDENTS AS AN EXAMPLE OF A PURE, TRUE, UNSTUDIED, VERY HONEST AND IMMEDIATE RESPONSE TO A WORK OF ART. FOR A BRIEF POINT IN TIME, SHE OWNED THE PAINTING AND THE SPACE. IT WAS A PERFECT COLLABORATION BETWEEN ARTIST AND AUDIENCE.

Back to the Gallery—

My daughter is bi-racial, and so discussions about heritage, history, and racism have always been a part of our family. She is aware of her father's Celtic background and my African heritage, and always enjoyed the narrative explaining how these seemingly opposite heritages could link up to create the wonderful person she is. America, America—the troubled, wonderful agent of this union. She is also very aware of the extremely complex nature of race relations in America and how it affects our lives today. The animation we sat down to view offered Walker's rendition of the history of African American culture, with the slaves, masters, and sexual situations that we have come to expect in her work. What would be the response from a young bi-racial woman? My daughter, who represents a very large constituency, felt that this work didn't speak to her. I am curious to know what kind of dialogue Walker has with her own young, bi-racial daughter about her work. Is there any conversation about the rawness of the narratives? What will she say when she is asked about her

choice use of a pornographic lexicon to describe the history and pain of black people in America? My daughter and her friends/peers are also rejecting the derogatory images of black women in hip-hop videos: the overt sexuality that has no subtlety or redeeming values. They are rejecting the images that speak so negatively about themselves.

It's as if there is an open season on African Americans, especially black women. Our strength has been caricatured as negative and controlling. The vehicles for these caricatures are not as blatant as black-faced characters in minstrel shows or films; now it surfaces in the elite worlds of arts and culture.

A periodical as august and with a seemingly intelligent readership as *The New Yorker* can publish a cover that caters to the stereotypes and fears of many Americans by ridiculing Michelle Obama's personal strength and implying that her husband's name ties him to part of an ethnic group and religion. It is significant to observe that the arts are now being used as the vehicle for this denigration.

It is apparent that the mainstream art world has chosen to lionize those whose works portray the most derogatory, demeaning images of black people under the guise of an "edginess." To use these images has become a sort of gold standard to success. Other artistic points of view seemingly are not promoted, or discussed, or rewarded to the same measure. Any criticism or comment to the contrary, brands the person as envious, jealous, or old school. The dialogue has been manipulated in the art press to make it seem that there is a call to censor Walker's work, which is not the case. Questions are being asked, opinions are being offered, which is a logical conclusion when one is confronted by such overt imagery.

What I observed in my daughter's reaction was significant in the sense that she has no direct reference to the history that I saw first hand. I thought because of this that she would engage Walker's work with more curiosity, but that was not the case. She felt that this work had nothing to say to her.

The demographics describing the audience for Walker's work doesn't include me. I am a middle-aged African American woman and painter. I have lived through riots, been called nigger, and watched my mother cry when Martin Luther King was assassinated. This work is not instructive for me.

When I look at this work, I cannot get beyond the feelings of pain, regret, and hatred for the system that kept the older members of my family from achieving all that they could or living the life that was their birthright. I cannot laugh at the subtle and not so subtle humor, or become tickled by the sexual references and impossibilities in this work. I cannot divorce myself from the history that is still so very real.

—Gilda Snowden

PEEPING UNDER THE "BLACK SKIN WHITE MASK" OF KARA WALKER *OR* STILL WAITING FOR THE MASK TO FALL

What happened to the dialogue on race that Senator Barack Obama cogently laid out for contemporary America? The issue has not gone away in the more than one hundred years since W.E.B. Du Bois fingered it by projecting that race would be a festering scar on the American character throughout the 20th century. Certainly he was overly optimistic in this estimation. It is still festering in this first decade of the 21st century. Kara Walker injected her visual and narrative vision-versions of race relations in the national art dialogue and has had huge paydays ever since, but has she created more pain than she has healing for Black people? Has she created more healing than pain for white people?

The most important vista from which to view the Kara Walker phenomenon may be through the prism of another W.E.B. Du Bois's concepts: that of the "dual consciousness" that he ascribed to African Americans. Projected over a century ago his concept essentially says that Black Americans see the world through the slave experiences as well as through the experiences they share with whites and others as Americans. This raises questions like: Does Kara view herself through the eyes of the other i.e., white people? Is it possible for a black person to avoid this trap that is over-laden with multiple prongs of negativity about blacks and therefore leads to self-hatred? What Black artist, nurtured and socialized in America and seeking mainstream's sanction, does not play into or is not dependent on white valuation?

Forget the rumors or facts of the embrace of the Norton art establishment combine and the McArthur Fund's anointing of her. Let her be associated with all of that. Whether or not it is neo-paternalism the vibrating and enduring ambience associated with that heritage is like swamp dew. It keeps coming back and hanging around and no amount of sunshine can wipe it out permanently. Let her collect all the accolades and the attendant financial rewards. For all we know she could be robbing Miss Anne's pantry. Is she a living example of another generational "spook that sits by the door"?

Who is opening the door to museums, collections and banks for our famous "Negress"? And just whose standards, behavior and conduct is this "Negress" validating in turn? The mindset of the moneyed elite is that of the slaveholder reincarnate. Shouldn't we allow Kara Walker the freedom in her mind and in her studio to do that or whatever? Even at our collective expense? Maybe at some point she will arrive at that genius state for those of us trying very hard

to comprehend both her trajectory and her terribleness. How and where does she share, if at all, the loot from the pantry? Ironically we are trying to ban the "N" word from the national vocabulary, but at the same time we are letting Kara and others gentrify it and insert it into the sociology of our national art. Is it enough to merely target the "N" word? Government funded museums are loading up on the art of the "Walkerites" and using tax dollars to do so—at our *double* expense.

You can bet that her retired parents paid mucho psychological dues for her in their academic and corporate careers.

This writer is of the same generation as Kara's parents and has a concrete sense of the dues they must have paid to achieve and to provide for their family. They are of a generation that was inspired by and benefited greatly from the struggles and gains of the prior generations of artists and cultural activists like Elizabeth Catlett, Samella Lewis, Aaron Douglas, Charles White and Jacob Lawrence. Using their art in the service of black liberation as opposed to personal gain was what gave our artists and art a heroic role in America. They gave a defining purpose to our generation of black artists before "black art" became a generic term for artists of African descent in America. Many of that generation idealistically became ensnared in the lure and contradictions of the integration oriented movement. Most artists of our generation benefited from and most joined in the protracted national struggle against cultural, political, and social racism in the arts and in society. We were clear about our goals. We were clear about who our artist heroes were. Then comes this peculiar turn in the 1990s with artists like Kara and a band of her imitators.

The "Walkerites" seem to have no problem with desecrating the memory and achievements of men and women who gave their intellectual and spiritual lives to eradicate unjust images and stereotypes of our people. Perhaps most of these "Walkerites" are ironically the result of the historic failure of our protracted struggles and are the epitome of all that was feared. Could it be that they have trouble with their own self-identity and hatred for the collective self? Are they afflicted beyond the mere dual consciousness highlighted by Du Bois and underscored by the work of psychiatrist Franz Fanon? They seem to be unaware of the role they cast themselves in by pimping off the hurtful and fabricated negatives that continues to infect the consciousness of most of the people in the world. We are all steeped in the thoughts and values that underpin Western, if not global education, religion and art. Stereotypes have mocked and marked us for decades. Now it is our children with their children that mark us by making mockery of even themselves.

Someone said this is a generational issue. Indeed, It has been with us for many generations. It is generational in that my generation (the one that matured in the 1950s-and 1960s) internalized wholesome values of self-identity that were delivered to us by way of our families, segregated schools, communities,

our artists, and our liberation preaching churches. All combined to offset the psychological damage we incurred over centuries of assaults on our psyche. This grounding and respect for our traditions somehow did not quite survive into the latter 20th century and early 21st century. The worldview of many of Kara's parents' peers was derived from the history of heroic survival of individuals and collective movements that took up our struggles from the moment of our captivity until today.

Where is the fault? Where is the collective consciousness?

What is *the*, or better yet, *our* solution? We cannot stop Kara from taking it to the hoop or the bank. Possibly the best thing that can be done is for us to re-dedicate ourselves to the upholding of our own values. The times are calling for increased dedication to the support of the art that we believe represents us—speaks to our worldview and provides enduring healthy images for now and tomorrow.

A kind of anti-defamation movement is in order within the arts. Voices of condemnation must be heard in our media, our schools, and from PTAs, concerned cultural organizations and all the institutions that trace their reason for being to the heritage of positive cultural traditions of our struggles for freedom. Condemnation while educating and voicing our choices, rather than the choices we allow to be imposed upon us. We cannot rely on or wait for those fattening on the marketplace and its manipulators to become righteous; nor can we wait for those feeding at its troughs to stop gorging on the juices of our servitude. Perhaps the days of our self-hate would be less painful and debilitating if we would believe in ourselves as ancestors-to-be and start acting like we are.

—Edward S. Spriggs

These personal ruminations have been recorded over a period of about one year. They were written between more than a dozen or so calls from Howardina Piindell whose task it was to stay on me to add my voice to a projected publication of reactions to the art, rise to national prominence, and importance of artist Kara Walker, the youngest child of Larry and Gwen Walker of metropolitan Atlanta, Georgia.

"MY COMPLEMENT, MY ENEMY,
MY OPPRESSOR, MY LOVE."
... UH, WHAT?

There are those who might say that nobody is being forced to look at, buy or accept the work of Kara Walker. People are going to do what they do and as long as they don't do it all over you, so what, right? But, what happens through the images of Kara Walker *is* done all over us and comes with a price. That price is the aftermath of the indirect and morbid manner in which the Walker product is created, consumed and ultimately layered throughout an already existing system of chronic oppression, which, is largely the theme of Walker's exhibit—American chattel slavery.

Because the images of Kara Walker, which have been cloaked as art and excused as being cutting edge, the acceptance and consumption of her work is legitimized. The offence is dismissed into the money-making and attention-getting excitement of being labeled controversial, which pretends to get people talking but actually aggravates the oppression and brings about more. This is not about Walker's freedom of speech as an artist, art as a form of cutting edge expression or anything else—these are simply terms that put this whole thing in a format that has nothing to do with what's actually going on which is the focus of my concern.

What is often not realized is that the present condition of American racism is the long-term result of this society having been established by a process of invasion, conquer, genocide and chattel slavery. Some might acknowledge the political and historic implications, however, rarely are the emotional, social and psychological implications acknowledged in the present condition. Through invasion, conquer and genocide of indigenous people, land was stolen. Chattel slavery not only brought free labor, it also brought something else. Identity. An American identity that would rationalize the entitlement to stolen land, free labor and the ability to dominate in order to preserve the entitlement was the pervasive mortar that has enabled generations of chronic oppression.

Since the supremacy of anyone is false, ideas and behaviors had to be invented to make the falsehood seem true. False superiors required false inferiors. Since no human group volunteered to be inferior, the inferiority and its belief system had been imposed by force. The key to the only kind of existence possible among those whose identities depended on the falseness of another is the co-dependent structure through which interaction encoded to preserve supremacy occurs. Secrecy, conspiracies, hidden agendas, threat, knee-jerk reactions, and all

kinds of irrational behaviors are some of the elements that required participation, cooperation of all involved, powerful and powerless alike, conscious or not.

The human reaction to chronic oppression is specific and not an accident. Many feel things have changed and progress has been made in America, but a deeper examination will show that things have in fact mutated while the condition, though in more contemporary terms, is in tact. The situation around Walker's material bears that out—not just the “art,” but the entire situation from inception to consumption is included.

In actuality, Ms Walker's title “My Complement, my Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love” is an indication of an abusive relationship, which can entrap participants into a seemingly never-ending drama of conflict and abuse. This is generally known in other examples, such as battering or alcoholism but not so much if at all, with regard to chronic racist oppression. Participants will protect oppression as it has been normalized and often cherished or glorified through sentimentalities or societal institutions. The perception is that oppression (or abuse) is the only reality and it is normal.

Lets say we take Ms. Walker at her word (at least her quoted word in an interview) that there is a love/hate relationship among those of African descent with slavery and that she wants to put this in-your-face as a show of her defiance and tellin' it like it is. Problem. Her observation in itself is pathological in that it is part of the oppression rather than a true confrontation of oppression.

Approach is very important. Delivering a message or communicating an expression can be given meaning by the approach taken. I can prepare a feast for two people serving one at a dining table and throwing the same food on floor for the other. The horrific facts of chattel slavery do involve rape, coercion, torture, starvation, death and chronic threat. Her approach to these things is from her view that all black people like slavery “a little bit.” She is not telling facts as they happened to real human beings, she images fantasy and interpretation through images that are convoluted and presented in grotesque caricature.

In contrast, in the late 1990s lynching was brought back to society's attention by way of an exhibit of post cards of photographed lynchings. The savagery of lynching was horrific enough, but the consumption of the act was through a product of tourism. Postcards. Suffice it to say at this juncture, that the horrific images were approached and formatted in an exhibit so that the truths were presented in terms that showed this happened to real human beings. The viewer of the exhibit witnessed not only the horror, but the consumption of the atrocity through postcards. The exhibit reminded America “in-your-face” about its truths. It was not a way America chose to view itself and the exhibit did not get the attention or corporate support of Kara Walker's images, however, it revealed a truth and was accepted among the survivors as a validation of an experience and exposed a lynch-permitting society for the role it played in the atrocity. So then, should all artistic creations of social or political meaning be in the form of photographs? No, but the medium should be appropriate to the

message if a particular response is to be made or objective is to be met.

Walker's images are cartoon-like, reminiscent of Dr. Seuss's caricatured style. The curvy lines are playful and exaggerated lending a humorous tone. The figures in silhouette function as a way for the viewer to experience the images while the human is erased in the horrific events. We don't see the eyes of the people—of course not—that's not what silhouettes do, but then to erase the humanity from something so inhumane, together with permission for humor, results in degradation.

Another aspect of oppressive interaction between abused and abuser also plays out here. Slaves could say or do things as long as it didn't threaten the esteem of white supremacy. Usually, humor or entertainment was a vehicle through which controversial or risky things could be said or done as long you keep them laughing or in some other way feeling gratified. The cartoon-like style of Walker's images deliver the message in satirical tones, and therefore safe, entertaining and shelved as controversial for the intellectuals or anyone else who may need a place for any complicated feelings.

Additionally, the format in which Ms. Walker's images are presented and consumed as "cutting edge art" would not be considered *cutting edge* or any other kind of art if other genocidal events in history were put in such a context. This can only happen to those who are within the permission of white supremacy to dehumanize.

What I do think is significant here is the mindset that creates such material and the mindset that accepts, approves, profits from and upholds it. Why? All participants are affected collectively as a result of all events that occur in a family, group, community, congregation or society impacted by chronic oppression. When an incident that facilitates or enables, celebrates, or recreates an act of oppression, it is an affirmation and approval of such and creates permission for more of the same. Worse yet, that "same" can complicate and mutate into more insidious forms of oppression making it hard to identify thereby eluding the victims from the source of conflict and suffering. Oppression is formatted and redirected in terms that make it difficult or seemingly impossible to end.

Clearly, as Neely Fuller, Jr. presents, that if you don't understand white supremacy, everything else will confuse you. Albert Einstein said that problems couldn't be solved out of the same level of thinking that created them. Behavior, attitudes and emotions that facilitate or aggravate abuse and oppression will not end unless there is an unequivocal change of the collective and individual mind. We know that certain ideas and behaviors just ain't gonna fly in this society (an African actor who was to perform the role of Jesus in an Easter play got death threats). But behaviors and ideas that are consistent with the fantasies, profits and modalities of white supremacy will always be permitted. Thus the presence, acceptance, and profitability of Walker's images that display, mock, and ridicule an infamous event of human history leaving viewers gratified that society can bring this topic to the fore.

Consciously, there may be those who feel that Walker's images are about the freedom to create any material and title it whatever she wants. The failure to set limits while behaving without a sense of boundaries (classic chronic oppression) is indicated in the title of Walker's exhibit—the relationship of abuse, existing with the horror, the failure to be able to distinguish between love, camaraderie, indignation and assault is typically a result of chronic oppression. By erasure of the victim and crime of the perpetrator (thereby excusing abuse is really happening while the viewer is permitted to voyeuristically indulge in this silhouette peep show), the morbid behavior sustains the muddled and confused perceptions.

While her reported observations that Black people love slavery “a little bit” and, “where would (black people) be without the struggle?” appear to bear truth, they are not statements of normalcy but are rather consistent with the construct of chronic abuse. The spooky caricature of the images that pretend to bring about a dialogue about racism don't do that at all. That's the cover. Typically, as in all abusive relationships and settings, there is a cover for the act, the enabling of the act and the suffering from and gratification from the act.

The ending of chronic oppression means the willingness and ability to confront its origins and establishment and to be ever vigilant in heading off behaviors and ideas that directly or indirectly keep it in place. The point is to confront identity distortions, belief systems and behaviors, not applaud the symptoms, miscalculate the obsessions as reality (nobody “wants” or “loves to be” oppressed), but to understand in order to undo the oppression and chronic addictions, fixations and associations that bring about more of the same. It is our responsibility, as moral human beings who require coexistence, peace and justice as much as we require oxygen to be capable of identifying all that brought us to the point where we now stand. If we continue to fail to understand the morbidity of chronic oppression, we leave ourselves prey to the most heinous and hideous acts occurring and mutating around us without being able to prevent or end it. If we continue to try to fix things with the same level of thinking that created it, we will not be ever able to think through the condition. We will only be able to react through the same addictions, compulsions, obsessions and distortions that maintain our collective state.

The work and consumption of Kara Walker and others doing their creative thing and whatever else, is for us to take the opportunity to identify, dissect and utilize as long it continues to be in our midst. The only way this can happen is to work for comprehension of the process and a complete change of mind. The calls for “dialogues on race,” especially in the midst of this very interesting upcoming [2008] Presidential election, would be time better spent if the causes and motives that brought about the condition in the first place were confronted and brought to an end.

—Asiba Tupahache

KARA WALKER AND BLACK FEMINIST VIDEO ART

Black Feminist art has been efficiently sidelined by researchers to account for a mere handful of artists which the white-centric art world designated as canonical: Adrian Piper, Faith Ringgold and Kara Walker. The fields of Black Feminist theory, criticism and art are in dire need of reexamination. The research for this essay, while centering around the video art of Kara Walker, will also serve as an exploration into the debate regarding the status of art works created by black women—an attempt to historicize and contribute to the literature of this field. The limited nature of literature on this topic is easily explainable by academic racism that still lingers in Euro-American centric institutions. Even more pressing is the essentialist nature of assessing the creative products of Black women: "It suggests a cohesiveness of culture and context that simply does not exist [. . .] the debate continues because of the relative sameness of position that all place people find themselves in with regard to white culture in the Western world."¹ It is this suggestion of cohesiveness, formulated through stereotype, which will frame my research and assessment of Kara Walker's video art.

If Kara Walker is indeed the Post-Modern Goya, as Jerry Saltz has exalted, her work must then be a fine example of subversion and perversion. The black paper cut-outs of her recent video installation . . . *calling from the angry surface of some grey and threatening sea. I was transported* (to be referred to simply as *Calling*) beckons viewers to experience and placate a narrative of vicious and sadomasochistic acts. There are no saving graces as the characters are trapped within Walker's savage, uncouth, grotesque and barbarous stage set. *Calling* "operates on a plane where bits and pieces of memory and experience and myth are sutured together into a crazy quilt of neo-historical romance."² The central video projection is a convoluted and non-linear narrative of an enslaved woman and young child and an older white enslaver. The scene opens with the enslaved mother and white enslaver engaged in sexual activities, where at one instance the master suckles from the breast as if he were a small child. As the enslaved child approaches the scene from the plantation's fields his fury ensues and he begins to beat the enslaved mother. The video quickly jumps out of sequence to a scene of the boy child having his leg sawed off after being caught in the act of foreplay with another young enslaved girl—the white enslaver is infuriated by the boy's spoiling of his property. This punishment seems to only ignite the sexual flames of the young boy who seeks his own sexual nourishment from the

mother's breast. The stump that remains of his lost leg, at this point, resembles something more comparable to a semi-erect phallus. The mother denies him such pleasures and in a fit of rage he attacks her with his crutch and murders her. Now lifeless, the boy partakes in incestuous necrophilia and lays sexual claim to the corpse. There are not actors and this elaborate narrative is visualized with black paper cut-outs—in the style of 18th century silhouettes. At times the screen which divides the puppet-masters and the stage set is translucent and viewers can see Kara Walker and her assistant smiling and laughing in delight at the scene which they act out—her laughter does little to demonstrate empathy with her characters' plight. It is best stated by Betye Saar that: "Kara Walker['s art is] sort of revolting and negative and a form of betrayal to the slaves, particularly women and children; that it was basically for the amusement and the investment of the white art establishment."³

It is not necessary for Black feminists to create autobiographical work to be politically engaged. However, Black feminist criticism has suggested that the (re)presentation of morally irresponsible black stereotypes in art by Black women is counter-intuitive. Selwyn R. Cixous's argument for the study of autobiographical literature typifies the opinion of Black feminist academics: "The Afro-American autobiographical statement is the most Afro-American of all Afro-American literary pursuits. It is bereft of any excessive subjectivism and mindless egotism."⁴ Belinda Edmondson emphasizes this ideal type of Black feminist creativity, "the autobiographical subject emerges as an almost random member of the group, selected to tell her tale. Black autobiographical literature emphasizes the commonality of experience and its position as an alternative history."⁵ Edmondson advocates that what is at stake in the autobiography is the survival of a cross-cultural, cross-national accounts of the socially marginalized. What follows are two examples of video art which counter the impersonal and temporally removed nature of Walker's *Calling*. Adrian Piper's *Out of the Corner* (1990) and Howardena Pindell's *Free, White and 21* (1980) both exemplify the way by which Black feminist artists implore autobiographical elements in video art to subvert the stereotypical norms of identity by psychologically engaging their viewers through personal recollections.

Piper's *Out of the Corner* is one of the artist's more verbally directed video installations. The video opens with the artist claiming, "If you feel that my letting people know that I'm not white is making an unnecessary fuss, you must feel that the right and proper course of action for me to take is to pass for white." She assumes the reaction of the viewer by asserting their subconscious racist reactions to her statements. The installation's other video monitors light up and persons of presumed European ancestry speak in turn: "Some of my female ancestors were so called houseniggers; who were raped by their white slavemasters. If you're an American, some of yours probably were, too." Through the voices of mainstream whites, Piper furthers her tactics of discomfort and confrontation. Peggy Phelan emphasizes the role which the verbal element of this video has

with the audience: "Adrian Piper has demonstrated that part of the meaning of race resides in the perpetual choice to acknowledge or ignore its often visible markings. [. . .] Since race is thought to be "carried" by blood and the history of enslaver for African American women is also the history of rape, the belief that one is "purely" white or black is difficult to sustain."⁶ Jane Desmond, as well, explains that such queries and commentary contorts the societal constructions of race and racism. Desmond states that: "Race is an historically developed concept attributing meaning to specific physical attributes which are regarded as 'evidence' of social identity. [. . .] [Piper] acknowledges the arbitrary legal and social codes that measure blood to determine racial categorization."⁷ Piper critiques race beyond biological constructions and investigates race as a social category of difference.⁸

Piper's monologue in *Out of the Corner* explores the physicality of blackness as integral to the societal spectacle to which Black Americans and Europeans have been subjugated. Since the era of colonization and slavery, Blacks have been used as a spectacle of otherness—or rather, become this spectacle for what they are perceived as being "deviant" of (and their deviance rests in their being the other). Piper confronts the construction of otherness and the systematic marginalization that Black women have endured. Her work is, "comparably clear and powerful," in that it envelops the, "exploitations of the physical realities of Black American existence [that is] not found among the myriad works of black male artists of various aesthetic persuasions and political ideologies."⁹ However, this should not be understood as an essentialist marker of successive Black female creativity—which must cater to the causes of liberation and group identity. Rather, Black female artists have historically positioned themselves since the Civil Rights movement in the United States to visually establish their unique and compromised positions within black and feminist communities. Patricia Hill Collins asserts that it is their collective experiences, not their collective creativity, which binds this artistic production. "For Black women as a collectivity, emancipation, liberation or empowerment as a group rests on two interrelated goals. One is the goal of self-definition or the power to make one's own reality. Self-determination, or aiming for the power to decide one's own destiny, is the second fundamental goal."¹⁰ Collins opens the conversation of racism onto itself by addressing the experiences of those directly affected by such discrimination. The video work of Walker and Piper diverges at this point, where Walker's self-reflexive investigation of racism is limited to fictionalized/ fantasized sources.

Piper attempts to reconstruct viewers' perceptions of race and self-identification as both a Black and a woman. On the other hand, Walker chooses to work within and for the art institutions' practices of stereotyping which merely conform and valorize racial inequality. Her cavorting with the white Euro-American constructions of racial superiority is emphasized in Howard Halle's *Time Out* critique of Walker's 2007 exhibition at the Whitney Museum, "Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love." "The problem

is that Walker isn't some outsider speaking truth to power; she's an official artist, leveraging her privileged status to take liberties with our racial sensitivities while revealing a hint of self-loathing beneath her narcissism. [Ultimately,] it's a neat trick, though this gray-wash of complicity is colored by self-congratulation: not only the artist's, but the audience's as well. A trip through her feel-bad world makes you feel good about yourself."¹¹ Piper consciously chooses to position herself in the video to subvert the traditional constructs of Blackness—this allows her to easily manipulate viewers' perception of racial identity. Whereas, Walker's video, while being much more confrontational and disturbing in its visual constructions, is conformist in its lack of alternate readings and reliance on fostering the hegemonic discourse. Her creative silence to the atrocities of racism merely pacifies the audience to confirm that mainstream's viewing of otherness is correct.

Created ten years prior to *Out of the Corner*, in *Free White and 21* Pindell sat before the camera for 12 minutes and delivered in a simple and symbolic way a demoralizing account of racism's enforced invisibility.¹² The video's direct confrontation of the art world and white feminists, among other audiences, is the powerful precursor to Piper's *Out of the Corner*.¹³ Pindell's story-telling is interrupted by footage of the artist wrapping her head in white gauze bandages—reversing blackface that was popular in minstrel entertainment and acting out the construct of whiteness. The other footage intermixed in the story telling is as a white woman with a blonde wig, a stocking over her head, and dark glasses. This figure appears between segments of the stories, as the white chorus she chastises the artist for being mistrustful and unappreciative. The tragic moral of the video is delivered at the end with the white-Pindell confirming "But then, again, you're not free, white and twenty one." Pindell's appropriation of masking subverts the identifications of white and black in a concessive admittance to marginalization's unsteady foundation. Freida High W. Tesfagiorgis discusses Pindell's work as emblematic of direct social criticism which questions the legitimacy of race as a social construction: "Pindell encourages people of color to work together to open 'closed doors'; the visual arts are emphatically not a 'white neighborhood.'" Pindell's activism interpenetrates that of various people of color including the African American cultural nationalist patriarchy; the different cultural groups operating from the particular ideological positions to counteract art world racism."¹⁴ Unfortunately, Pindell's and Piper's videos are easily subjugated to that status of, what Patricia Hill Collins terms, "outsider within."¹⁵ Their marginal placement by Euro-American-centric art institutions only serves Black feminist artists to reaffirm their exclusionism as, "a special perspective of self, family and society."¹⁶

Pindell's video emphasizes Black feminist artists' attempt to reject the formalist paradigm of modernism. She visually overturns the notion that the work of art be judged merely for its significant forms.¹⁷ As the work of Black feminist artists is performative, it must work within alternative mediums. Black feminist critics, as a whole, are resisting the basic assumptions of art historical

cannons that identify artists as great or genius.¹⁸ For both Piper's and Pindell's autobiographical revelations run counter to Modernity's and Post-Modernity's call to order of artistic hierarchy. Nannette Solomon surmises that: "Vasari introduced a structure of discursive form that, in its incessant repetition, produced and perpetuated the dominance of a particular gender, class and race as the purveyors of an art and culture."¹⁹ The refusal to synthesize art into formal and contextual conventions has compromised the commercial status of Piper and Pindell.²⁰ As a result their work remains on the fringes of the art establishment in its continuing protest and critique of the institution itself. Walker's commercial success is fostered by her conforming to the demands to create the artistic masterpiece. Her work does little to overturn and critique such conventions. Wherein conformity is equated to passivity, Black feminist artists of the previous generations have refused to remain victims. Artist Faith Ringgold proclaims: "Everything about my life has to do with the fact that I am a Black woman. The way I work has everything to do with that, because I am struggling against being a victim which is what Black women become in this society."²¹

In the case of Piper and Pindell the video art had metaphorically and literally serviced their need to construct an outlet that appropriately engages their audiences. Video, unlike any other medium, efficiently dictates and regards the boundaries between gender and race that social orders have erected. Yet even Walker, while within the art establishment, has acted out against the discourse of otherness as a social norm. As artists, blacks and females, they constitute a radical shift in the perceptions of how art could and should be viewed—their art embodied a certain dexterity which would call into question the social and political relevance of art from the socially marginalized. The rhetoric of Black feminist art lacks any true definable convention. However, the commonality of Black feminist artists rests in the appropriation of the physical into the metaphysical by concession of the socially constructed body into art. As Du Bois writes in his 1925 essay, *The Social Origins of American Negro Art*: "It is the cry of some caged soul yearning for expression and this individual impulse was combined with a certain group compulsion. That social compulsion in this case was built on the sorrow and strain inherent in American slavery, on the difficulties that spring from emancipation, on the feelings of revenge, despair and aspiration."²² Walker's process of re-evaluating America's marginalizing history has no ending, rather only offer viewers' beginnings—complicated beginnings and a disturbing tableaux which implies there is "entertainment" and "titillation" in genocide, slavery, and by implication, mass murder, thus undercutting and denying resistance.

—Harry Weil

- ¹ Belinda Edmondson, *Cultural Critique*, No. 22. (Autumn, 1992), pp. 75-98.
- ² Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker*, Duke University Press, 2004. 39.
- ³ Betye Saar, African American artist, in PBS series *I'll Make Me a World*, 1999.
- ⁴ Selwyn R. Cudjoe, "Maya Angelou and the Autobiographical Statement," *Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation*, Ed. Mari Evans, New York: Anchor, 1984, 6-24.
- ⁵ Edmondson, 89
- ⁶ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, New York: Routledge, 1993. 16.
- ⁷ Jane Desmond, "Mapping Identity onto the Body," *Women and Performance* 6, no. 2 (1993): 102-126. 106.
- ⁸ Desmond, 107.
- ⁹ Lowery Stokes Sims, "Aspects of Performance in the Work of Black American Women Artists," *Feminist Art Criticism*, ed. Arlene Raven, Cassandra Langer and Joanna Frueh, Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1988, 207-226. 210.
- ¹⁰ Patricia Hill Collins, *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998. 18.
- ¹¹ Howard Halle, "Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love: The chickens come home to roost in Kara Walker's survey," *Time Out* 630 (October 25, 2007).
- ¹² Holland Cater, "Art in Review: Howardena Pindell," *New York Times* (July 28, 2006), <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9C03E2DB123FF93BA15754C0A9609C8B63/> accessed December 18, 2007).
- ¹³ Carter, "Art in Review."
- ¹⁴ Freida High W. Tesfagiorgis, "In Search of a Discourse and Critique/s that Center the Art of Black Women Artists," *Black Feminist Criticism*, Jacqueline Bobo (ed.), Oxford: Blackwell, 2001 146-172. 152.
- ¹⁵ Patricia Hill Collins as quoted by Tesfagiorgis, 152.
- ¹⁶ Tesfagiorgis, 152.
- ¹⁷ Tesfagiorgis, 156.
- ¹⁸ Tesfagiorgis, 157.
- ¹⁹ Nannette Solomon, "The Art Historical Cannon: Signs of Omission," (En)Gendering Knowledge: Feminists in Academe, Joan E. Hartman and Ellen Messer-Davidow (eds.), Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992.
- ²⁰ Tesfagiorgis's discussion of Black feminist artists creating work that runs counter to established conventions of art is beyond the limitations of this paper. However, this conversation is something I am interested in investigating as it directly relates to the institutional critiques which their work purposes. Tesfagiorgis goes on to write: "Interestingly, Black women artists observe that their "outsider" status in Eurocentric discourses, with its critical distance from the mainstream, stimulates a greater sense of independence and creative freedom. Piper finds joy and freedom in the margins, in the company of artists who are doing 'much of the really advanced, exciting and original work' with a clear view of the 'narrow range of aesthetic options validated by the mainstream.' [. . .] By recognizing canonicity within constructs of its particular culture, whether Italian Renaissance or Yoruba, the critical art

historian must reject universalizing tendencies, and work toward constructing analyses based on informed judgments that are validated by cultural grounding

²¹ Faith Ringgold, "Interviewing Faith Ringgold/ A Contemporary Heroine," Faith Ringgold: A 25 Year Survey, Eleanor Flomenhaft (ed.) Heightsend: Fine Arts Museum of Long Island, 1990.

²² DuBois as quoted by Tesfagiorgis, 160.

SOME THOUGHTS ON BLOGGING: THE WHITNEY MUSEUM AND KARA WALKER

The Whitney Museum provided a blog for visitors of "Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love" as an uncensored venue to react to the exhibition. The site explained: "Kara Walker intends for her artwork to inspire reaction and dialogue. This blog provides a place to share both." The blog provided a series of questions which responders could react to in order to generate conversation including:

What personal associations do you bring to the exhibition?

Do you ever find yourself using stereotypes despite your best intentions?

If so, how? Do you think art can be a form of resistance?

Like many of the reviews of the exhibition, commentators on the website praised the exhibition for directly addressing our views of racism. Helen, who identified herself as coming from the rural South wrote: "I hope it makes all who visit the exhibit have just a bit more sensitivity and a bit more strength to contribute to stopping the wrongs across our world that are ever so present right now." What I find quite disturbing about Helen's comments is that she creates this universal ambiguous collective identity—this *our*. There is a very interesting concern here for who and how exactly this *our* should be defined. Critics Holland Cotter and Jerry Saltz, amongst others, are also guilty of this essentialist construction in the manner which they praise this exhibition. Cotter writes: "Ms. Walker draws an important one: The source and blame for racism lies with everyone, including herself. It seems we are addicted to it. We claim to hate living with it, but we cannot live without it." Yet, Cotter never addresses who constitutes this *we*. Is *we* those who read and have access to the *New York Times*? Is *we* those who are able to afford the costs of admission and the luxury of time to see the exhibition at the Whitney? The semantic conundrum is that *we* and *our* are not clearly defined and the perceptions that these proponents discuss are merely abstract assumptions on visibility and experience. Michele Wallace surmises this situation the best in her entry on the blog: "But in the end, after all the interrogation is said and done, it will just be a kind of twisting in the wind in relation to the art and the obvious appreciation this work has found in a predominantly white art world." In an ethical sense those on the blog and those proponents of Walker's work who celebrate its confrontation of internalized racism should acknowledge, as Wallace does, their white subjectivity. Even more poignant is James' commentary on the

blog. His rather blunt statement in regard to the racial divide of the art world offers the most revealing commentary thus far: "Absolutely disgusted!!! I saw the exhibit and was disturbed at hearing all those so-called liberal-minded white folks proclaim how 'beautiful' and 'wonderful' Walker's exhibit is. Her exhibit caters to their sick racial and sexual fantasies. I didn't leave that exhibit feeling a sense of liberation. It is a shame that this is what a black artist [h]as to do to become the toast of the art world."

Opponents of Walker have asserted what viewers do experience is a moralistically flawed construction of racial identity—of the past and the present. There were several persons on the Whitney blog who equated the immoral acts of her silhouette murals with Walker herself. Blogger mutope wrote: "There's no need to gain the world and lose your soul." Even more direct is Lore who empathized with Walker's purported anxieties: "I hope all her anger and frustrations cease one day, because it has to be a very sad life to see the world through those eyes." It is quite possible, as Lore suggests, that there is a more personal issue at play here than Walker lets on. But, if there is any bit of the artist to be found it is best seen as a record of her personal hang-ups with her self-hating and racist consciousness. There seems to be an anger in her work boiling just underneath the surface. The unfortunate result is that her works are far less free than she imagines."

The generational gap is another contentious issue concerning the criticism of Walker's work. Critics Cotter and Saltz dismissed any negative criticism as attributed to overzealous geriatrics. Cotter writes: "several African American artists of an older generation, with careers dating to the 1960s, publicly condemned her use of racial stereotypes as insulting and opportunistic, a way to ingratiate herself into a racist white art industry." However the most poignant and directed criticism on the blog was from Christopher, a self-identified 26-year old African American, who felt accosted by the onslaught of grotesque and perverse representations of Blacks: "Walker's work does not subvert the white supremacist imagination of blackness but rather re-presents it in the tangible hear-and-now, bows to its hegemonic force and makes offerings of eagerly copulating slave women, debased pickaninnies and confused buckcoons [. . .] Walker's work disturbs me because while it does present a horrifying, grotesque, epic vision of this country's foundation it simultaneously hints that it is all o.k., that blacks are just as complicit as whites and that these horrors were somehow, in part, self-extracted. She presents this racialized psychosexual fantasy as an obscured reality /shadows on the wall/, as the (subhuman) raw material blacks are truly made of."

This construction of select generational angst is countered by Christopher's eliciting the criticality of Betye Saar and Howardena Pindell. The elder established Black feminist artists reacted out of anger as Walker has visually overturned the struggles of the Civil Rights movement. Christopher's reaction is rooted in his distrust of a highly marketable and commercially successful artist. It is not to

say for certain that commercially successful artists cannot maintain a critical outlook, however the context of her work is compromised by the exhibiting institutions. The conversation regarding this body of work has only added to the work's mystique—a shallow self-sustaining hype. While the success of Walker is undeniable, the conversation regarding monetary compensation for moralistic obligations is a dish best served cold.

I return to James again, whose blunt commentary is a voice of pure reason in this unfolding debate: "White people's images of black people never said anything real or true about actual black people. Those images were about their sickness. Now here we have a black woman doing the same. We need to ask, what does all this say about Kara Walker. It offers the real truth about black people." Following his lead, I recommend that the Whitney should have provided these questions to generate conversation:

What does this exhibition tell of the racism that is apparent in major American museums?

Is racist imagery necessary when discussing work by black artists?

Do you think this type of art just caters to the white museum-going audience's already racist view of black persons?

What does this work have to say about Walker and her own racial hang-ups?

—Harry J. Weil

KARA WALKER'S NEW BLACK BOTTOM FROM HOTTENTOT VENUS TO NEGRESS SILHOUETTE

Some propositions of theory: In a market, art and music, whether elitist or popular, would appear and flourish—like corn flakes, perfume, and bottled water—in response to effective demand. Persons financially willing and able to consume them, to derive pleasure and satisfaction from them, constitute the demand. Elementally, market products must have a price and must have value. The creation and management of desire and value are mediated, dynamic processes, engaging the individual artist, critics, marketing people of varied specialties, moralists, governments, and other constituents of the social order. Value creation may or may not be democratic. As cultural and social products, art and music generally will have low prices, since everyone can to an extent sing, draw, talk, or snap a photo; this universal market features innumerable suppliers and too few paying consumers for both luxury and elite goods and mass and popular ones. Fiercely and extremely competitive, such a market would tend to engender spectacles and other manifestations of distinction and difference.

Kara Walker, the phenomenally successful and controversial African American artist, decided in 1992 while a graduate student at Rhode Island School of Design to base her work centrally and radically on the perilous concepts and practices of race, racism, racialism, American slavery, and kindred matters. She initially produced a series of murals comprising silhouettes cut from black paper that depicted slavery-era whites and blacks engaging in activities variously described by supportive critics and persistent but under-funded detractors as obscene, shocking, pornographic, scandalous, sensational, sadistic-masochistic, debased, etc. From her exhibition debut in NYC in 1994 until the present, Walker has ridden a wave of effusive critical praise, accolades, and financial success from the mostly white art intelligentsia and establishment while defending against concerted negative responses from several quarters in the black community and from some whites as well. Her work has become a very public battleground, the media effects of which have predictably reinforced and further fueled her stellar career. In 1997, following charges that she produced degrading images of blacks to ingratiate herself with a white liberal art establishment, Walker responded with a series of drawings entitled "Do You Like Cream in Your Coffee and Chocolate in Your Milk?" The drawings were accompanied by diary-style musings, or notes, exhibited along with the images. In these she confesses, "I knew that the only way to gain an audience in the art world was to cloak my work in the guise of blackness. I would have to make work that was so directly racial that no one

could help but notice." No doubt the rapid, singular and stunning market success of Jean-Michel Basquiat—black artist whose content is strongly Afro-centric and "primitive" to some—especially following his untimely death in 1988 from drug intoxication, would have influenced her choice of strategy.

Apparently Walker did anticipate a reactionary backlash to her strategy. She had after all grown up partly in Atlanta and lived with her family in Stone Mountain, until recent years a bastion of KKK activity and white supremacy. Moreover, she had experienced the palpable polarization that resulted from the civil rights activities of the 1960s that culminated in a steady flight of whites from inner-city Atlanta until the late 1990s. Through various tactics she would distance herself from the inflammatory and malodorous tableaux that she wrought. Among other means, she would make it clear that the works were fictional romances without correspondence to any historical reality. Some of the works bear titles suggesting that they were made, not by her really, but by some third person alter ego who happened to be named "Kara Elizabeth Walker, an Emancipated Negress and Leader in Her Cause." Another tactic may be called "level playing field, equal opportunity": Everyone is racist, to some degree, in some way, at some time; racism is a broad, all-embracing social condition. And like the Gangsta Rappers whose lyrics are gratuitously and nauseatingly crude, violent, pornographic, raw, and misogynist, she could always say that as an artist she was merely exposing and reflecting complex social phenomena and practices, not causing them. (Never mind that in the process of airing his or her take on such phenomena in the media, the artist very likely affects the public's perception and thinking about the phenomena in question. Performing and visual artists with wide followings in both the white and black communities and who deliver the same messages and imagery over a period of years will hardly be neutral in impact on public opinion and social mores.)

In the art world of the early 1990s, Walker was not alone in presenting risky ethnic content in her work. Carrie Mae Weems, Michael Ray Charles, and other black artists introduced references to race that made some segments of the African American community uncomfortable and, in some cases, disturbed and agitated. The dust had settled from the bitter Nigger Drawings affair of 1979 in which a unified black cultural community, joined by many influential white critics, artists and intellectuals under the banner "Committee Against Racism in the Arts," rose up in protest against a brazen exhibition of the same name at Artists Space, a publicly funded alternative arts institution located in lower Manhattan. Donald Neumann, a white male artist, decided to call his one-person exhibition of abstract drawings, *The Nigger Drawings*, because, he explained, of his intense involvement with the charcoal medium in which the works were rendered and not because of careerist calculation and aspirations as some observers charged. Ostensibly neither he nor the gallery director was sensitive enough to anticipate the firestorm of protests, including multiracial pickets, a lockout of protesters, and subsequent sit-in demonstration, that ensued.

In consequence, the executive director of the space departed. The energy harnessed during the protest transmuted into a decade-long campaign against the exclusion of minority and women artists from galleries, museums, and other white-male-dominated mainstream cultural venues. Hip-Hop culture, of which Basquiat was both product and eminent producer, appeared in the mid-1980s. Spawned by the children of the civil rights generation of the 1960s, it was in many ways antithetical to the values of the civil rights generation who had walked the picket lines and sat down in the struggles for inclusion in the 1960s and 1970s. Permissive, dissolute, and loose to a degree never before seen, Hip-Hoppers and Rappers themselves employed the n-word facilely and often indiscriminately.

As fashion, the young men wore costumes that were big, baggy, of solid uniform colors, and beltless, so that they showed their bottoms with ease, as an insult or invitation, if they so choose. The no-belt style had been brought to the streets from the prison system but without any overt political agenda. Undoubtedly, the baggy formlessness of the clothes provided useful cover for drugs, weapons, and other secrets. In time, the beltless look gave way to a belt substitute that freed the hands and that permitted full exposure of underwear-clad buttocks full-time. When Kara Walker brought her silhouetted murals of wild sexuality to an astonished and transfixed New York art audience in 1994, they were of a piece with the over-the-top extremism of Hip-Hop music, replete with lyrics of black b-word plural, 'h-word plural, and their fat black b-word plural, which had been ten years in the making and which had enjoyed more patronage from white middle class youths than from young blacks.

The history of race and racism chronicles many references to bottoms: as in buttocks, as in an abyss—both physical and moral, as in a place of low terrain in the Southern United States (and occasionally in the North) that is usually inhabited by the poor and often the site of banned activities, and as in a certain folk dance whose origins lie in African-American entertainment circles of the 1920s. Like light versus dark and white as opposed to black, top and bottom have arguably become overarching, manifold tropes of race and racism, whatever they are, that distill and encapsulate the entire history of Eurocentric and Afrocentric interaction. Various meanings of bottom are often implied in double-entendre in a given instance of written or oral expression, and the light/dark imagery impinges as well, through evocation and silent allusion or through automatic mechanisms of the mind.

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom

All the boys in the neighborhood,
They say your black bottom is really good.
Come on and show me your black bottom;
I want to learn that dance.

Now I'm gonna show y'all my black bottom.
 They stay to see that dance.
 Wait until you see me do my black bottom;
 I want to learn that dance.

—Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, 1923–28

For almost two centuries the saga of Sara Baartman has unfolded in the West. Popularly known as “the Hottentot Venus,” this Khoikhoi woman, born in 1789 and a servant of Dutch farmers, left her home in Southern Africa in 1810 bound for London. In so doing she became part of a long-established and profitable industry in Europe built upon the exhibition of unusual and exotic humans. Bartman’s particular attraction was her enlarged buttocks, a condition known as steatopygia from which she suffered to an unusual degree. She went to London willingly with the brother of her Dutch employer who promised her one-half of the receipts from her exhibition; the arrangement would make her a wealthy woman, she understood, enabling her to return as such to Cape Town after her European sojourn. She badly miscalculated. It would be nearly 200 years before she—or rather her remains—would return to her homeland. Her dreams of capitalist fortune were never realized. Sara Baartman’s life, body, biography, and the academic interpretation of all of these have been focuses of protracted struggles among contending and opposing intellectual and political forces. The controversy over Bartman began upon her arrival in London and continues to this day. It resonates in contemporary dealings between the West and Africa, as in the South African government’s reluctance to accept Western medicine’s explanations and treatment of AIDS. It shadows the debate about Kara Walker’s oeuvre.

Since 1810 a lengthy and growing Baartman bibliography has accrued. For a start the reader might consult the following: Stephen Jay Gould’s “The Hottentot Venus,” published in *Natural History* in 1982 and again in his *The Flamingo’s Smile*, 1985; Sander L. Gilman’s “Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine and Literature,” published in *Critical Inquiry* in 1985 and included also in Henry Louis Gates’s *Race, Writing and Difference* of 1986; Z. S. Strother’s “Display of the Body Hottentot” included in *Africans on Stage*, edited by Bernth Lindfors, 1999. An essential summary of her life and its aftermath follow.

Sara Baartman’s display in London caused a sensation by all accounts, but aroused early on the opposition of abolitionist and other elements who tried unsuccessfully in a court proceeding to show that she was being exploited and held against her will. Baartman demonstrated to the court in Dutch that she was not being restrained and understood very well the financial terms under which she was being shown to the public. In the Gould account, she had a long

tour of the English provinces after her London engagement then moved on to Paris, where an animal trainer exhibited her to great sensation for 15 months. In Paris she posed in the nude for scientific paintings and was visited and studied by the prominent French naturalists of the day, including the famous anatomist Georges Cuvier, before dying there of an inflammatory illness on December 29, 1815. Cuvier dissected her body after her death; her genitals were preserved in Formalin and displayed in Paris's natural history museums until 1974, when under adverse political reaction they were withdrawn from public view at the old Musée de l'Homme. Nevertheless, a plaster cast of her remained on view in the museum until 1982. Her skeleton and brain were also preserved.

Gould's and Gilman's articles dramatically raised Baartman's history and plight in the public consciousness and galvanized feminist and liberal interest and activism on her behalf. Prior to the mid-1980s she had been of interest primarily to scholars researching and mulling nineteenth-century exhibitions of curious people. In his introduction, Professor Gilman presents a background discussion of iconography, then posits that Baartman is an example of an "ideologically charged" icon, a representation of reality—not reality itself, that is bound up with myths and stereotypes. Summoning evidence from art, literature and medicine, he asserts, "Sara Baartman's sexual parts, her genitalia, and her buttocks, serve as the central image for the black female throughout the nineteenth century." Of further interest, Gilman argues that medical studies of prostitutes purported to find anatomical and physiognomic similarities between them and Hottentots and that "in the late nineteenth century the perception of the prostitute merged with the perception of the black." Of significance to our purposes, he adduces the historical concept of the "swamp," the earliest stage of human history. Historians such as J.J. Bachofen, G.W.F. Hegel, and Arthur Schopenhauer indicated in their writing that the Hottentots and bushmen of Africa dwelled at this most primitive and lowly stage and provided thereby a benchmark by which Europeans could measure their own advance. Gould's remark that only the genitalia of three women of color—a Negress, a Peruvian, and Baartmann, none of white women or men—had been collected at the Musée de l'Homme is telling.

Several artists in Europe, Africa, and North America have produced works in homage to Baartman and with the purpose of furthering her cause and legacy. There have been books of poetry, novels, films, works of visual art, and performances created to tell her story and, in some cases, to rehabilitate and reconstruct her persona in the public's mentality. Several African-American women created supportive works: Suzan-Lori Parks wrote *Venus* in 1996, a well-publicized play in which Baartman is protagonist playing opposite the Cuvier character who studies her; the sculptor Barbara Chase-Riboud wrote a fictional biography, *Hottentot Venus*; and Renée Green, conceptual artist, created in 1989 a moving installation entitled *Sa Main Charmante* that restores dignity to Baartman's legacy by avoiding images of her, in effect evoking her through her

absence, and by displaying absurd and discredited nineteenth-century medical reports about her.

There were also calls for Baartman's return to her native land at the same time. Nelson Mandela formally requested that France return her remains in 1994 after he assumed the office of president of South Africa. Eight years would pass before the French Assembly, after considerable debate over concerns about future requests of this kind, acceded to South Africa's request. Her remains were repatriated on May 6, 2002 and inhumed in a stately enclosure in the Gamtoos Valley near Cape Town.

Mississippi Goddamn

The name of this tune is Mississippi Goddamn,
And I mean every word of it.

Alabama's gotten me so upset,
Tennessee made me lose my rest,
And everybody knows about Mississippi Goddamn!

You don't have to live next door to me.
Just give me my equality.
Everybody knows about Mississippi,
Everybody knows about Alabama,
Everybody knows about Mississippi Goddamn!

That's it!

—Nina Simone, 1964

For civil rights activists of the 1960s, the enemy was clear: diehard white segregationists in the South, who denied blacks their basic rights and who maintained their racist regime through violence, were the opposition to be overcome "by black and white together." The movement became more militant and moved toward a leftist extreme following the assassinations of Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King, and the bloody Chicago police riot during the Democratic party convention, all of which occurred in 1968. The Black Power movement surfaced amid the riots that followed. Whites were pushed to the margins or excluded altogether. Black musicians and artists introduced messages and imagery of resistance by all means necessary to achieve freedom and self-determination. Something of a cultural revolution took hold among young blacks. Visual artists "liberated" Aunt Jemima, Sara Baartman's sister of

the diaspora, and pressed her into service of the struggle. The West Coast painter, Joe Overstreet, unveiled his canvas *The New Jemima* in 1964. His updated take on the popular and profitable branded icon has the subject firing a machine gun and hitting her target, wreaking havoc and mayhem. Betye Saar, another West Coast artist, produced her version of Jemima revisited in 1972. Her assemblage, *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, features three depictions of her subject: the Quaker Oats package version reproduced repeatedly with practical fidelity as background for the piece, a dominant "cookie jar" variant with a matronly figure of unnaturally dark complexion and exaggerated facial features holding a broom and grenade in one hand and a gun in the other, and an inset painting of a contemporary Jemima holding a crying white or mixed-race baby on her hip in front of a picket fence and behind the clenched fist symbol of the Black Power movement.

Elizabeth Catlett, the venerable African-American sculptor who became a Mexican citizen, uses the clenched black fist as riveting focus in her most celebrated work, the life-sized *Homage to My Young Black Sisters* of 1968. *Homage* is a symbol of black feminism worldwide produced by a radical activist artist of deep socialist and internationalist conviction. Sharon F. Patton writing in her book, *African-American Art* (1998), states, "it [the sculpture] stands for black nationalism and women's liberation, both of which were vociferous at the time of its creation. The women's movement, led mostly by white women, followed the strategy of black militants...by adopting a value orientation or at least a perception of shared female identity, and a recognition of themselves as the 'other.'"

Many inter-racial relationships developed during the freedom rides, sit-ins, and pickets of the early- and mid-1960s. Marriages and children resulted, bringing with them ambiguity, ambivalence, uncertainty, attenuation, questions, nuances and subtleties—all complicated and complex gray areas requiring construction, discussion, adjudication, interpretation, mediation, etc.

The Hip-Hop children of the civil rights generation were not in the main socially or politically engaged, not even in the face of reversals, during the conservative 1980s, of hard-won gains from their parents' civil rights struggles, such as the dismantling of affirmative action and related preferences. Dubbed Generation X and the Lost Generation, they repaired to a subculture, a ghettoized bottom, noted for intra-racial violence, drugs, conspicuous materialism, inhumane and nihilist interaction within their larger communities, and the long-exposed male bottoms, which are now being legislated out of sight through the initiatives of weary uncles, aunts, mothers and fathers.

Walker's silhouetted and emblematic Negress plays on in an expanded repertory in varied media to throngs in Europe and America through her retrospective, *My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love*. The show's own complement—its controversy—continues its run, too, in public discourse, hovering like a cloud or an illuminating body over Kara Walker's panoramic

and pseudo-historical *mises en scène*. Yet her orgiastic race spectacle, with Hip-Hop flava, is staged in a world of globalization and an ongoing emergence of enormous populations of peoples of color in the economic, cultural, and political arenas. One wonders if, in the not-too-distant reordered, realigned and globalized world, Eurocentric constructs of race and their attendant political and intellectual battles won't seem like a curious side show, relics consigned to and documented in poorly attended and little comprehended anthropological museums. Conflicts along other markers of difference, perhaps ethnicity blended with nationality, would move to center stage.

Two other questions seem pertinent to Walker's artistic enterprise: Why at the end of the twentieth century in America a resourceful young African-American artist such as Walker has to create radioactive race-centered work to get the attention of the art world? If she had used her critically acclaimed formal inventions to dramatize and celebrate black and white abolitionist collaborations on the underground railroad, for instance, would anyone have cared?

—Clarence D. White

AS THE 10 YEAR GOTHIC NOVEL CONTINUES TO REVEAL ITSELF...

The mainstream remains predictable in its selection process, pronouncements and oversight of the art domain. As it caters to fashion whimsy and global markets it siezes upon the newest visual phenomena while securing the ultimate blue chip. Yet there is still the designation of a marginal stance as the standard for African American art. The highlighting and promotion of a single "voice" from the margin into the mainstream as the measure for all others further confounds comprehension. The placement of this "selected" artist as a standard is undeniably suspect. The works of Kara Walker as a ten-year Gothic novel continues in to reveal itself and clarify the anti-heroine as "Negress." A daunting title, an angular perspective in which to define the isolating of the horror-based period in our recent human history. The notion that the survivors of triangular trade in their new environs were somehow complicit in the enslavement mode is accepted.

As I review each art magazine cover, each publication, each article featuring the bold shadow images of Ms. Walker, the visual language evolves asserting the silhouetted players (a staging set before us) are to be without change. The interpretation is clear.

Ms. Walker, the authoress, seems compelled within each chapter of time to deliver the angst-ridden imagery, wrenching the Negress from personality and persona. The silhouetted players seek no future . . . no character is familiar; no one resembles Harriet Tubman, that heady Negress, who fit neither within the silhouette nor the shadow. She moved too quickly. She did not know how to slow dance. The authoress does not seek solutions; she has no interest in cultural tenets but rather embraces the rawness of elusive stereotypes of the survivors and their kin. The 10-plus year novel is engrossed in the cyclical sequel of the tragic Negress. I have become acquainted with her within her matchless confinement of the finely chiseled "cut." She cries (and I feel her pain), "I find no air to breathe, I cannot move, I am transfixed in nightmare."

As a viewer/reader of this novel, I discover that the authoress provides no history for relief, the Negress laments, "There are no revelations to enable me, I am deeply wounded, my dance is staged, my steps calculated and programmed, I am ravaged. Can I escape? I have no hero.

This scenario finds me mechanized in a motionless rush. Can I become? I am urine-soaked, I am bloodied. Is this bravery? Do I inspire? Am I a heroine?

Why am I the broom, the beheaded chicken, why must I fondle the hatted monster's private parts?

Can I not save myself? Can I not protect and save my young, why is my body exploding and spewing excrement and sightless visions. Why am I tormented in this silhouetted invention at every turn, in the round, in every way? Why do I mock myself, I am choking. Does she find whimsy in my blindness? There is no light.

Why does not the authoress anguish in this way? Or does she? Is she entitled and wish me great ill. Does she blame me for my condition within her blade? Does she plot my eternal deaths? Does she enjoy my suffocation? Does she suffocate as well? What does she want of me in this imprisonment? She drinks water, she breathes, she has become a hero. Does her heroism depend upon my enslavement? Does she reflect? Can I not have a name? She has a name. Does she have hope for me? Will I grow old? Can I escape into time? Can I write a poem—a couplet? Can I utter a phrase, will the text evolve? Has my tongue been removed, why must I remain a featureless shadow? Does my authoress find refuge within my enslavement?

Why must I remain shadowed and flattened? Why is the sharpness of my contour so applauded when I cannot breathe? Am I the figment of an imagination? Where is my heart? Where will my hands rest? Why is my story so unimportant? Why am I so diminished? Why does the audience revel at their sight of me? Can they not free me? Why can I not hear rounded music? Why are they under my skirts, why can I not run away? Why does the audience cheer and toast my plight? Don't they question the realm of my servitude? Do they enjoy my curving spine? Do they find my silence an attribute? As a Negress can I find negritude? What has my authoress planned for me? Will it be merely a life of continued debasement chronicled in the new world in the stadiums of belief? Will she not allow my utterances to be heard, my song, my plea, my ultimate idea?

Will she not speak up for me?

Why does she leave me without dignity? Why is that courageous on her part?

Why do the audiences revel in my misery? Have my reactions been coded? Is this the calculated view one must assume of the atrocities, the sea walk, the unraveling of race memory?"

—Shirley Woodson

SECTION II: KARA WALKER-YES

INTRODUCTION: KARA WALKER-YES

For those of you who have diligently read the essays in the previous Section I of this book, and may have been surprised and perhaps shocked by the vehemence of the objections and criticism by fellow African American scholars and artists to the success of one of their own, may not be aware that they were reacting to the response of the media that showered near-universal praise on the art of Kara Walker.

What the writers in Section I were attempting to do was to emphasize the damage Walker (and the media) had done to the entire African American art community—to those dedicated artists contributing meaningful and thoughtful art and who had been staking out their place in the history of art for the last 200 years.

But the media was blinded by Walker's work—by her incendiary images of the enslaver and the enslaved—exploiting their sexual relationships and bodily functions in a provocative style closer to pulp fiction and other sub-culture periodicals.

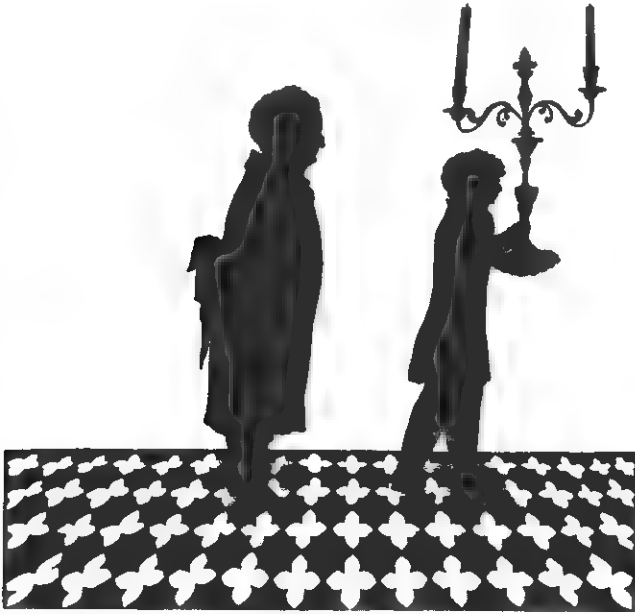
Her use of the silhouette was declared inventive, original and brilliant by the critics. Even though history has long recorded the style as used first on Egyptian graves and ancient Greek vases, moved on to China, then to Persia, and was first seen in Europe in Germany around 1631 and France in 1759, and later brought to America by German settlers in Pennsylvania.

One critic wrote: "it was made in an unusual way, from black-paper silhouette figures cut by hand and affixed to the gallery wall. . . the piece had the airy, Valentine's Day prettiness of a romantic ballet." When in actuality, Ms. Walker's racist fantasies had taken over and obscured the reality of history. Yes, we know that the elimination of slavery was a hard and long-fought battle in the 19th century and that it took another century for Black Americans to gain full equality and for us to become a nation for all. But, what is the gain in Walker's portrayal of history with shockingly pornographic images of fellatio, defecation and other abusive images of sex, plus rape, torture and murder, all as fun and games or as romantic fantasies of life on the old plantation.

Some critics even tried to lighten the impact of her work by calling it "playful" and "mischievous." Many quoted Walker's own (frequently accompanied by laughter) oft-repeated phrase justifying her work: "All Black People in America want to be slaves a little bit."

Are these historical analogies or closer to the ravings of fans of whatever is the hot new thing. Perhaps in years to come those besotted critics will have to live with their actions in the dark night of their souls.

—C.N.



Luise Duttenhofer. "Goethe in Stuttgart" c.1797



Karl Fröhlich.

KARA WALKER-YES: EXCERPTS FROM REVIEWS, INTERVIEWS & PROFILES

(Brent Sikkema Gallery (NY), Skidmore College Tang Gallery (Saratoga Springs (NY), Deutsche Guggenheim (Berlin), Whitney Museum of American Art (NY), and ARC/ Musée d'art moderne de la ville de Paris)

Some critics have objected to Ms. Walker's play with racist caricature and her narratives of perverse interracial co-dependency. Ms. Walker has on her side a tradition that runs from Bosch through Goya and Ensor to Peter Saul, Robert Colescott and Nicole Eisenman. Drawn with seemingly effortless spontaneity and an uncanny knack for cartoon ventriloquism, Ms. Walker's draftsmanship in colored pencil, graphite or watercolor ranges from sketchy doodles to expansive allegories.

Fortunately, Ms. Walker has not abandoned the silhouette. In a work made this year, dozens of small, animated images cut from black paper cavort across an eight-foot-wide sheet of paper. Some are too obscenely graphic to be described here; some are almost illegible yet explosively urgent. One is the image of a striding little girl nonchalantly carrying a big black ball chained to her ankle, as if it were nothing but a toy. She is a fine personification of Ms. Walker's fiercely whimsical tragic vision.
—Ken Johnson, *The NY Times*, June 27, 2002 **Brent Sikkema Gallery**

In Ms. Walker's art . . . her blacks don't resist aggression, or at least not in obvious ways. They seem to give in to it, let themselves be abjectly used, often by one another. Whites in Ms. Walker's art often seem passive by comparison, but racial fates are intertwined. Everyone is down there together in the mud. The silhouette format is an apt emblem for this dynamic. . .

What is important [in her work] is the friction-generating character. . . . In the era of "compassionate conservatism," as some say gains won by the civil rights movement are unobtrusively rolled back and old emblems of resistance to the establishment are expertly neutralized, her beautiful-scary images keep pieties and prohibitions alike on the hot seat. If people are confused by what she's doing, she seems to say, that's fine. If they're fired up, that's better. It means they're paying attention, which is what any artist, and any political thinker, wants.

—Holland Cotter, *The New York Times*, May 9, 2003. **Skidmore Tang Gallery**

Kara Walker, celebrated for her panoramic installations depicting controversial issues of the antebellum South, dedicates this show solely to new drawings. . . . highly charged, disturbingly beautiful scenes that stimulate and cleanse the psyche of the collective unconscious. By presenting explicit and sometimes ambiguous sexual situations, Walker trips up our presumptions and gets beneath the surface of clichés of race, gender, and sex in America—making the viewer conscious of his or her own opinions on these matters. Employing various techniques and media, Walker's drawings are as visually and viscerally rewarding as her more familiar wall works.

—NR, *Flavorpill*, #160, July 1-7, 2003. Brent Sikkema Gallery

In the *Berliner Zeitung*, Sabine Vogel finds the cutouts wonderfully obscene. Delighted, she describes the figures' "swollen lips voraciously opened wide for fellatio," their "juicy corporeality" and "uncivilized lust." For Vogel, the subversive in this art lies in the form: the cutout is commonly considered to be a harmless occupation for nice girls. Walker, however, uses it to "dreamily invent the forbidden fruits of female desire, castration fantasies, and perversions." Thus, she frees her figures "from the censored canon of politically correct art," according to Vogel's words of praise. That's all very well, but is she allowed to? is what Karsten Kredel asks in the *taz*, [see *Kara Walker ?/ Yes/No* in following Section] while at the same time posing the opposite question: does every black artist who deals with racism have to assume the "burden of representation?" According to Kredel, Walker doesn't reject the role of the voluptuous "negress," but rather takes it on experimentally: "to be, as someone who is both desired and feared, 'a little bit of a slave' in order to counter the measuring gaze and to draw up a relationship of mutual dependence . . . by not leaving the realm of fantasy to white men, she rejects the responsibility of representation." This could be seen negatively, but one could just as well value it as a "liberating act."

—Sabine Vogel, *Berliner Zeitung*, Deutsche Guggenheim

Walker's vigilance has produced a compelling reckoning with the twisted trajectories of race in America. . . . forcefully pluralize[ing] our notion of a singular "history." They create a profusion of back stories and revisions that slash and burn through the pieties of patriotism and the glosses of "color blindness." . . . She plays with stereotypes, turning them upside down, spread-eagle and inside out. She revels in cruelty and laughter. Platitudes sicken her. She is brave.

—Barbra Kruger, *Time Magazine*, May 14, 2007

Walker has generated controversy among some African Americans, who believe her source material—grotesque stereotypes of black people—panders to white audiences' secret prejudices. But her abject carnival of violence actually serves her well, making us cringe beneath the shadow slavery casts on today's society.

—Elisabeth Kley, *ARTnews*, February 2008

This exhibition tackles history and memories that some of us would rather not think about, or forget; it dares to portray . . . the “unspeakable.” This includes rape and mutilation and other power relations and their consequences. . . Walker’s repertoire began to crystallize and gain popularity in the 1990s when many presumed that the most egregious historical African American caricatures and stereotypes had disappeared in American material culture and the media, and the status of African American artists seemed more precarious in the kinds of mainstream institutions that welcome her. And yet, her work forces us to consider how this past established foundations for and continues to shape the world in which we now live. We should recognize Walker as a beacon for a generation of younger artists born after the civil rights era, grappling courageously and sometimes provocatively with the world inherited from it by drawing on history, here the antebellum era in the South. Walker’s institutional recognition is exceptional in today’s modern art scene, where aesthetically innovative and quizzical rarely carry such forceful political overtone.

Opinions about her may differ . . . A lot of noise, for better or worse, has sometimes surrounded her profound and provocative creation. . . Walker has often been *shadowed* in her career by a range of questions: How could a neophyte like *her* have garnered such critical acclaim so quickly? How could anyone so *young* have risen so quickly in the art establishment? *Who* is she, or even, *more bitterly*, who does she think she is? Why does she do what she does anyway and what on earth does it mean! . . . Yet, a walk through an encompassing exhibition like this one reveals Walker’s very genius. . . a hard and diligent worker . . . a rigorous thinker with an incredibly dynamic vision as an artist, and the inexhaustible depths of her originality. She is not the new kid on the block anymore, . . . She is in a league of her own. She is truly . . . all grown up.

This show . . . is unprecedented in its comprehensiveness. It gives us an opportunity to examine Walker’s artistic repertoire, and to see its staggering range, in all its splendor—and utter rawness.

—Riche Dianne Richardson, *Transatlantica*, american studies journal,
ARC/ Musée d’art moderne de la ville de Paris, 2007

EXCERPTS FROM INTERVIEWS:

I

“When Kara Walker’s art first went public the response was instantaneous. There was love, and plenty of criticism, too. But there was also proof that art can be political, funny and beautiful all at once. . . her astonishing silhouettes deliver a biting satirical comment on racist representations.” (*Introduction to Interview with Kara Walker—excerpts below*):

JH: Does it bother you that your work's in the hands of rich, powerful, and white people? Do you have some sort of control over what happens to your pieces once they're out of your hands?

KW: I don't have much control anymore. . . . I'm losing control lately and trying to get it back. Initially I thought this situation was just the perfect sort of irony, the perfect "what goes around comes around" situation. . . . of course my work's going to go to rich, white collectors and I'm going to be . . . the typical black artist—getting corrupted by the man , then becoming dependent. But really the only thing that bothers me is when collectors are so proud of owning something that they show it indiscriminately.

JH: [referring to a German movie where a woman is first reviled and later receives an award for exposing Nazi secrets, she responds saying] "You're only doing this to shut me up!" Do you feel this way about being awarded the MacArthur Grant?

KW: [laughs] Yeah, kind of. That crossed my mind a couple of times. Like, Well, now what? OK, I'm twenty-eight, now there's nothing left to aspire to anymore. It's actually been like that since the ball started rolling, when the first New York show [Drawing Center 1994] generated all those phone calls and I thought, This is strange. . . . as soon as that happened people were very interested in my work. And now they're trying to get rid of me.

JH: You generated plenty of ill will, too.

KW: . . . an issue of the *International Review of African American Art* basically dedicated to trashing me, and Betye Saar got together about 200 protest letters about me. [Walker responded with a note]: . . . I was a little dismayed she never actually contacted me. . . .she never took the time to talk to me personally, just . . . saying things like "I don't have anything against Kara Walker, I just think she's young and foolish."

KW: It seems like I had to actually reinvent or make up my own racist situations so I would know how to deal with them as black people in the past did. In order to have a real connection with my history, I had to be somebody's slave. But I was in control. That's the difference.

—James Hannaham, INTERVIEW, November 1998

II

ART 21: What are your first thoughts about this piece here at the Guggenheim [Berlin]?

KW: Well, this piece is called "Insurrection! Our Tools Were Rudimentary, Yet We Pressed On." I always wind up going back to the very beginning of everything with my pieces, so it seems like it's a continuation of a series of work that I've been doing with large, narrative silhouette scenes, building around this idea of the cyclorama or a kind of historical exhibit. In this case it's somewhat hysterical. The idea at the outset was an image of a slave revolt in the antebellum

South where the house slaves got after their master with their instruments, their utensils of everyday life. And really it started with a sketch of a series of slaves disemboweling a master with a soup ladle. The reference in my mind was the surgical theater paintings of Thomas Eakins and others.

... before I even started working with a narrative that circled around representations of blackness, representations of race, racial history, minstrelsy, and everything that I wanted to investigate, I was making work that was painterly and about the body and the metaphorical qualities of the body. So I always think about this work and think about history in terms of the body. And this act of excavating that's been such a current and recurring theme (particularly in the histories of feminist artists, feminist writers, African-Americans) is about investigating and eviscerating this body of a collective experience, a history, sometimes to the point—at least in my reckoning—to the point of leaving nothing intact. There's just this pile of parts and goo. And I entered into this project, a black woman artist, from the perspective of a person who has been presented with a pre-dissected body to work from—body of information. These gallbladders and hearts and stomachs are all the things that would make me complete should I choose to use them correctly and put them back together. So in a way it's *Frankenstein*-like.

ART 21: Do your pieces, like "*Insurrection!*" always have a particular narrative that you want viewers to follow?

KW: Actually, talking through my work has been one of those problems. ... I'm more interested in what viewers bring to this iconography that I'm constantly dredging out of my own subconscious. And I'm often surprised about what comes up and what seems an up-holding of my own invention—what seems connected to a series of representations of the vulgar as paired with the blackness that has already existed and has been regurgitated over several hundred years, or over a history of African-Americana. So I couldn't really name these characters or caricatures in the way that the wall texts at the museum or reviewers who've looked at my work have sought to, or have elected to. I think these figures are phantom-like. They're fantasies. They don't represent anything real. It's just the end result of so many fabrications of a fabricated identity.

ART 21: And yet your own name often appears in the title of your works as well? Are you treating yourself as a fictional character?

KW: I think part of that is a game I've played. The naming of the pieces and the way that I've represented myself as the maker of these images, always with this jab at the notion of privilege or entitlement as it's been doled out occasionally to young women in my position: African-American, female, young. I was interested in slave narratives and the romantic novel of one hundred and fifty years ago. When Phillis Wheatley's book of poems had to be verified by upstanding white men in the community and they put their stamp of approval on the authenticity of these words as though it were an impossibility that a black

woman could think of anything on her own. Now it's debatable, you know, how artistically worthy what she thought of on her own was, but that's really not the point. I like the idea of suddenly finding myself in the desirable echelons of the art world and presenting myself in this manner. So I am incredibly grateful for the approval of white society who understands that I am an anomaly. It should raise questions I think, maybe more than it does.

ART 21: It seems like you keep a lot of information in your mind simultaneously, numerous perspectives.

KW: There's a lot of information, but it's not nearly as researched as I want it to be. It depends really from piece to piece and from moment to moment. Things have sped up so much with the career aspect of being an artist that I always have my suspicions that that's to keep me out of the books. But no, it's twofold you know. There's a way that this work is two parts research and one part paranoid hysteria. And I've always kind of liked that, that impulse. of concocting half-baked theories based on the reading of a selective tome.

When I started investigating my relationship to my identity and what my identity means, it was in the context of artists doing identity-based art. I envy and have a love for people who research in great detail history or some moment in history, say feminist history, and then present it in a way that's somewhat didactic and matter-of-fact— a sincere effort to throw meaning out to an audience that maybe isn't conscious of this aspect of history. But I'm incredibly suspicious of that impulse too. I think that it's all going to be filtered through one's subjectivity and my subjectivity, as a young person at the end of the 20th Century, my subjectivity is of a sexual woman, as a person who makes sometimes really bad decisions. . . .

ART 21: Where does "Insurrection!" fit in the more recent projection works?

KW: This is the first piece I did using the projection and overhead projectors as a feature. And I exhibited it in Geneva, at the Center for Contemporary Art there. I built the piece in a very painterly way. It's actually the antithesis of the way that I think that I should work: starting with the backgrounds and moving to the foreground and then reworking the backgrounds, and basically cutting and pasting these colored gels, and drawing on the top and slapping them on top of the overhead projectors in a very slapdash way. The images, they grew around this central piece with the surgical theater or whatever you want to call it—evisceration, insurrection—and I decided to build it into a triptych based on the space that I had at the time. All of the pieces that I worked on have transformed depending on the space where they're exhibited. But this one was built as a triptych with the indoor scene in the center. The windows came on top of that. And then I thought I'd have what's going on on the outside and try to reduce the mayhem that I was envisioning to a few set incidences where there is some turbulence, some give and take: castration and self-castration, offerings and stealing.

ART 21: What do the projections mean to you?

KW: Projections came about as one of a series of steps. It's an easy answer to the idea of projecting. Projecting one's desires, fears, and conditions onto other bodies, which all of my work has tried to engage with using the silhouette. And it also created a space where the viewer's shadow would also be projected into the scene so that maybe they would, you know, become captured and implicated in a way that is very didactic. Overhead projectors are a didactic tool, they're a schoolroom tool. So they're about conveying facts. The work that I do is about projecting fictions into those facts.

ART 21 And the fact that they're beautiful. How does that play out?

KW: Beauty is just an accident. Beauty is just a happenstance. Beauty is the remainders of being a painter. The work become pretty because I wouldn't be able to look at a work about something as grotesque as what I'm thinking about and as grotesque as projecting one's ugly soul onto another's pretty body, and representing that in an ugly way. I have always been attracted to the lure. Work which draws a viewer in through a kind of seductive offering. Here's something to look at, stay a while.

ART 21: Did you discover something for yourself when creating this piece?

KW: Have I discovered something for myself? Well, this way of working was new with the projections. It was actually a lot of formal discoveries. Spatial relationships, things like that.

I think one of the things that's happened here and there with the work that I've done is, because it mimics narrative—and narrative is kind of a given when it comes to work that's produced by black women in this country—there's almost an expectation. I feel an expectation for something cohesive. There's an understanding within America about where that resolution is, you know, what that means to have a "Color Purple" scenario where things resolve in a way and a female heroine actualizes through a process of self-discovery and historical discovery and comes out from under her oppressors and maybe doesn't become a hero, but is a hero for herself. And nothing ever comes of that in the pieces that I'm making. And I'm increasingly aware of wanting to make that clear, that to some extent there's a failure for that kind of resolution and she doesn't become a.... You know she's not evil, she's not a hero either, but then she sort of engages these oppositions constantly and keeps it open, always knowing that the next question is "Who is she?"

And she is . . . I just say she is "dot, dot, dot. . . ." That's where I have this problem with language and naming right now, the Negress of earlier titles, the "Negress of noteworthy talent," who is me, who is not me, who is that entity of somewhat powerful sisterhood negritude, that is an idealization that stems partially out of the black power movement and partially out of a mainstream desire for the juicy strange other, the Josephine Baker banana skirt kind of desire.

Otherness embodied and otherness that embodies herself and otherness that plays at otherness. But who is she? Is she one or all of the characters in the work? I think of the work in the way that you have dream images and the door and the hippopotamus actually represent the same thing. They're all stemming from the same impulse somehow, which is something like a will toward chaos or a will toward attempting resolution with the certainty that chaos reigns.

This is so hard . . . yes, she's an idealization, disembodied. And also a re-embodied presence, with a will and a desire towards chaos. There is a will towards resolving that chaos with a certainty that it will never quite end. It will never quite reach a clear conclusion. It will progress.

— PBS: **ART 21 Film on Kara Walker, SInsurrection! Our Tools Were Rudimentary, Yet We Pressed On**"

III

ART 21: Who is the Negress in the title of "Gone, An Historical Romance..." Is she your invention?

KW: Well, the Negress, as a term that I apply to myself, is a real and artificial construct. Everything I'm doing is trying to skirt the line between fiction and reality. And for the most part I've titled exhibitions and a book or two as though they were the creations of a "Negress of Noteworthy Talent," or a "Negress of Some Notoriety." I guess it comes from a feeling of being a black woman, an African American artist—that in itself is a title with a certain set of expectations that come with it from living in a culture that's maybe not accustomed to a great majority of African American women artists. It's like a thing in itself. And it's a construct that is not any different to me than the Negress.

The Negress that I initially was referring to was out of Thomas Dixon Jr's "The Clansmen." This is the great racist epic of the late nineteenth century that "Birth of a Nation" was based on. And there's a figure in there who's described as a tawny negress who is part secretary, part lover. This nefarious, dark vixen. She's manipulating this misguided white statesman who wants to put blacks in higher offices and change the culture, and with this tawny negress, this vixen, the arbiter of our social norms. Could this icon of all that is wrong and sexual and vulgar be uplifted to the highest? My answer being yes—she would, she will.

ART 21: So there's a melodramatic aspect not only to the form that the work takes, but also to life as it's lived now?

KW: Melodrama... I've always been interested in the melodramatic, in outrageous gestures. One thing that got me interested in working this way, with the silhouettes, but then working on a large scale, had to do with two longings. One was to make a history painting in the grand tradition. I didn't realize I loved them for a long time. I thought that they were ridiculous in their pompous gesture. But the more I started to examine my own relationship with history, my own

attempts to position myself in my historical moment, the more love I had for this artistic, painterly conceit: which is to make a painting a stage and to think of your characters, your portraits or whomever, as characters on that stage. And to give them this moment. To freeze-frame a moment that is full of pain and blood and guts and drama and glory. It just became all the more relevant to my project.

... and I sometimes forget to mention this, but the second longing is about trying to examine what it is to be an African American woman artist, so it's not just an examination of race relations in America today... that's a part of it... being an African American woman artist. It's about how do you make representations of your world, given what you've been given?

ART 21: Can you talk about the humor in your work? Is it a tragic humor?

KW: Giddy humor. I described this kind of turbulence that drives most of the work, and it's a turbulence that's not unlike melodrama, or the kind of dredging up of every feeling one could possibly have about a situation which is all about feeling. And it's difficult not to laugh off that behavior, that sense of being overloaded, out of control, unable to contain even the horror of being able to think about something that you know you shouldn't be thinking about, or that you know isn't going to resolve itself just by thinking about it. It might not resolve itself by talking about it. It might not resolve itself by enacting laws about it. Or writing about it. And it's that feeling of needing to make this offering as a form of truth-telling, no matter how awful it is and then, uhg, you know, being flabbergasted at even having to do that! Why should that even have to be done? And then sometimes the work is just ridiculous and silly and weird.

ART 21: That's sort of truth-telling must be exhausting! Do you ever question yourself: "Whyt me?"

KW: I never say, why me? I gave myself this job. [LAUGHS]

—Excerpted from Interview by **ART 21** regarding Film on Kara Walker shown on PBS, The Melodrama of "Gone with the Wind."

EXERPTED FROM PROFILES ON KARA WALKER:

[In graduate school, Walker says she] "was looking for art that accommodates a political female sensibility," unlike painting with "all its [patriarchal] baggage."

Walker needed to come to grips with some things—to talk about race, the romancing of slavery, the origins of Blackface, the arguments put forth about cranial shape that supported 19th century racists' stereotypes. All of those references reinforced her logic that the old-world technique of cutting quick, inexpensive portraits from black paper as perfect to convey her hyper-realistic, emotionally charged images. [Walker explains her cyclorama] (a large mural that tells a story on walls that encircle a room) was also seminal because it "epitomized

the end of a type of moving picture making—movies were around the corner—and, like movies, was second class, overwrought, exhibiting no complexity and not large-scale enough to overwhelm and encompass you. Like the cyclorama, women's art is not associated with 'high' art."

—**Cheryl R. Riley**, Artist Profile, *Ebony*, June 2007

Walker's vision is . . . of history as trompe-l'oeil. Things are not what they seem, because America is, literally, incredible, fantastic—a freak show that is almost impossible to watch, let alone to understand. In Walker's work, slavery is a nightmare from which no American has yet awakened . . .

In using the silhouette, Walker was appropriating a sentimental form to build a narrative about power. . . . she was creating an art history of her own, one that not only took on the image of blacks in Western art . . . but went a step further, both through sheer technical skill and by shifting the axis of work way from satire and toward the realm of social realism, as well as social comedy. Walker's realism centered on her interpretation of the Negress, a figure that other artists had tackled before her.

—**Hilton Als**, *The New Yorker*, October 8, 2007

SECTION III: KARA WALKER-?

XXXII

EXCERPTS FROM REVIEWS OF KARA WALKER'S EXHIBITIONS

(Studio Museum in Harlem, Whitney Museum, Deutsche Guggenheim)

Walker's work is certainly high drama, weirdly tragicomic, with a deft narrative twist, but it has less to do with social reality than black rage, resentment and bitterness. . . . a futile attempt—or is it a deliberate refusal?—to come to terms with past history, suggesting that there is a regressive dimension to the sense of being a victim.

Walker seems obsessed with the past, as though to preclude a vision of the future, perhaps because it is a generalized American future rather than a specifically black one. Is she holding on to black difference in defiant fear of American sameness?

. . . it is because of this obsession that she seems to turn black suffering into a parody of itself, unwittingly reinforcing the stereotypes she parodies. Paradoxically, the means she uses to subvert the representation of the blacks seems to reify it.

I am suggesting that Walker's art is much more interesting for what it tells us about her psyche than for its ideology—its political correctness filtered through intellectually correct irony—and much more important for what it tells us about Walker's artistic cunning than for what it tells us about her in-your-face "attitude."

. . . I experienced no pity and terror—no catharsis despite the stressful drama—nor did I feel particularly enlightened with new insights into the situation of mentality in back America, if there is any single situation or frame of mind that defines it (doubtful).

. . . Walker's work is an ideological failure and intellectually inadequate, and hardly as subversive as it pretends to be, but an artistic success . . .

—Donald Kuspit, artnet.com/Magazine, November 4, 2003,
Studio Museum in Harlem

. . . Walker . . . questioned the very notion of a positive black image: "Every image of 'us' is mediated—filtered through the grounds of misrepresentation, bitterness and suspicion," she scrawled on one of the beautifully illustrated diary

pages on display at the Whitney. She doesn't think it's possible to mold new, untainted forms. We can only deconstruct those that already exist and uncover their ongoing corruption.

Her work is neither anti-black nor anti-white; it is broadly misanthropic. Both groups, as far as she is concerned, have forgone their claims to nobility or integrity. Walker scoffs at the notion of progress. To her, the distortions in self-image wrought by slavery's power relations have been completely internalized by both groups, which remain helpless in the face of history.

—Ariella Budick, *newsday.com*, October 14, 2007, **Whitney Museum**

. . . Ms. Walker's career, demonstrates what can happen when an artist's work is lauded for all the wrong reasons—for its subject matter and its slick delivery instead of for the quality of its form. The show remind us just how far away we have moved from demanding that an artist not merely have something to say but also that she has the visual vocabulary with which to say it.

Ms. Walker has said that her father, who is a painter, talked to her about "push and pull in the use of graphite and eraser," which she referred to as "superficial things." She also said that she occasionally feels like "somebody's pet project." Indeed she is the poster child for the continuing story of the country's racial inequities and transgressions. It is the go-to art whenever a curator wants to mount work that deals blatantly with identity politics and the not-button issues of sex, racial inequality, oppression. Black feminism, or slavery. Ms. Walker's art forces us to look hard at ourselves—our past and our present—or so the story goes.

[Her] work is graphic . . . She employs shock—strong language and caricaturist stereotypes of blacks and whites in acts of fellatio, sodomy, rape, bestiality, and child molestation, as well as those of lynching, mutilation, vomiting, and defecation—to get her messages across. Certainly, her work has a lot to say. Unfortunately, it lacks eloquence and depth. And because of this, her art often feels less like an exploration and more like exploitation—of both its subject and its viewers. When charged subjects remain too close to their source, when they are not transformed, and when they are reduced to platitudes and caricature, images merely push our buttons.

A lot has been said about Ms. Walker's "shadow" art—that its blackness stands for so many things, including likeness, race, emptiness, voids, stains, and the inescapable, black-and-white truth of her art's subject matter. Yet for a metaphor to work, it must, through comparison and conflation, be controlled to create a new living thing. This is where Ms. Walker's house of cards tumbles down. Her cutouts, without volume, weight, and formal intention, never become palpable. Because of this, they remain distant and intangible, leaving her exaggerations strident and her narratives adrift. Voids remain voids. Emptiness is empty, Black and white, never fully integrated in her work, are forces working

against each other.

—**Lance Esplund**, *The New York Sun*, October 11, 2007, **Whitney Museum**

Karsten Kredel questions Sabinine Vogel's words of praise in her review *the taz*, where she says of Walker, "she frees her figures from the censored canon of politically correct art," while at the same time posing the opposite question: does every black artist who deals with racism have to assume the "burden of representation?"

[Kredel's response]: "Walker doesn't reject the role of the voluptuous 'negress,' but rather takes it on experimentally: to be, as someone who is both desired and feared, 'a little bit of a slave' in order to counter the measuring gaze and to draw up a relationship of mutual dependence . . . by not leaving the realm of fantasy to white men, she rejects the responsibility of representation." This could be seen negatively, but one could just as well value it as a "liberating act."

—**Karsten Kredel**, *the taz*, December, 2008, **Deutsche Guggenheim**

APPENDIX

Lynching

Kara Walker in her interview with Jerry Salz in "Ill Will and Desire," *Flash Art*, November/ December 1996, p. 86 is quoted as follows:

"All Black people in America want to be slaves just a little bit."

"... in cartoons where African savages get pictured the European explorers are often placed at the mercy of savages."

"... Afro-Am or African-American artists are always espousing the horrors of slavery and Gen-Afro apartheid ... but horrors are always tolerable to repressed individuals to whom they may occur. This allows for a stronger sense of masochism in future generations, makes for riots, very colorful."

From "Race, Law and American Society, 1607-Present." by Gloria J. Browne-Marshall, NY & London: Routledge, 2007, p.172

"First his ears were sliced off, followed by fingers and genitals. The torture and the murder of Sam Hose were reported in the *New York Tribune*, 1899."

and from p. 187

"June 7, 1898. James Byrd, Jr., age forty-nine, was tied to a pick-up truck and dragged to his death. Byrd's throat was cut before his body was dragged over two miles behind the pick-up truck through the backcountry roads of Jasper, Texas. His skin, blood, arms, head, genitalia, and other parts of his body were strewn along the highway. His remains were then dumped in front of a cemetery traditionally used for Blacks. . . . Sadly James Byrd's grave has been desecrated twice."

According to Joy Degruy Leary, "Post Traumatic Stress Slave Syndrome" the following lynching was reported in the *Weekly Republican*, Springfield, Massachusetts, April 28, 1899.)

"Sam Hose. Was burned at the stake in a public road, one and a half miles from here. Before the torch was applied to the pyre, the Negro was deprived of his ears, fingers and portions of body with surprising fortitude. Before the body was cool, it was cut to pieces, the bones were crushed into small bits and even the tree upon which the wretch met his fate were torn up and disposed of as souvenirs. The Negro's heart was cut in several pieces, as was his liver. Those unable to obtain the ghastly relics directly paid more fortunate possessors extravagant sums for them. Small pieces of bone went for 25 cents and a bit of liver crisply cooked for 10 cents."

"While black men made up the majority of those lynched, as mentioned

earlier, black women did not escape this form of execution. In 1918, a pregnant Black woman named Mary Turner was hanged, covered with oil and gasoline and burned . . . as she dangled from the rope, a (white) man stepped forward with a pocketknife and ripped open her abdomen in a crude caesarean operation. Out tumbled the premature child. . . . Two feeble cries it gave—and received for the answer the heel of a stalwart man, as life was ground out of its tiny form.”

From: “Collected Works of Ida B. Wells– Barnett: Southern Horrors, Mob Rule in New Orleans and the Red Record.” 2007, p. 67

“He (Private Adolf Anderson of Connell Rifles) rushed to the street door, shouted the news to the crowd, and a moment later the bleeding body was dragged to the pavement and made target of a score of pistols. It was (the body) shot, kicked and beaten almost out of semblance to humanity.” (P.160)

Texarkana, Arkansas “The press dispatches of February 18. 1892, told in detail how he was tied to a tree, the flesh cut from his body by white men and boys and after coal oil was poured over him . . . set fire to him . . . and 15,000 (white) people saw him burn to death.”

See: “The Lynching of Emmitt Till,” edited by Christopher Metress, University of Virginia Press, 2002.

Emit Till, 15-year old kidnapped and lynched in Money, Mississippi in August 1955. He was beaten and shot in the head and one of his eyes was gouged out and part of his forehead had been crushed. His body had been dumped in the Tallahatchie River. The two whites that killed him were acquitted by an all white jury. The case was reopened in 2004 as a result of filmmaker Keith Beauchamp’s documentary, “The Untold Story of Emmitt Louis Till” which uncovered new witnesses. His mother established a Foundation in his name to help youth.

See “Banished,” 2007, DVD by Marco Williams

Medgar Evers, Civil Rights worker investigating violent crimes against African Americans shot in the back in front of his house in Jackson, Mississippi, 1962. He bled to death in front of his family. After three trials, his killer a white racist was convicted.

Rosewood, Florida, (1923) and Greenwood near Tulsa, Oklahoma were two African American towns that were destroyed by white mobs that murdered many of the inhabitants.

According to Gloria J. Browne-Marshall:

Andrew Goodman, James Chaney and Michael Schwerner who were Voting Rights Activists were lynched in Philadelphia, Mississippi in 1964. They were murdered by Klansmen and their bodies were not found for months. Klansman ringleader was convicted after two trials in 2005. In 1965, Viola Liuzzo, a white homemaker who drove from Michigan to Alabama to help with voter registration was murdered in Alabama by three Klansmen who shot her twice in the face. Three of the Klansmen were convicted for her murder and served 10 years.

Additional sources: “Lynching and Murder in the Deep South” by Michael V. Uschan, Lucent Library: 2007

Michael Uschan and Gloria J. Browne-Marshall state that after Blacks were freed from slavery the focus of whites' hatred was to lynch Blacks if they were not subservient or tried to defend themselves, tried to vote, had any form of achievement, who tried to read and have an education. It was also an attempt to stop Blacks from getting jobs except at the lowest rung. Uschan also states that for "several decades images of hung Black men or burned, disfigured bodies were printed on postcards and many (white) people sent gruesome photos to friends and relatives. In 1908 the Federal government made it illegal to send gruesome images through the U.S. mail." He further states that on a postcard dated 1917, along with an image of a horrifically lynched victim was written "This is the barbecue we had last night." According to Browne-Marshall lynching occurred more when whites felt they were economically deprived or there was a downturn in the economy. In the Appendix of her book "Race, Law and American Society" she lists statistics on page 269 compiled from 1882-1920.

In 1882, 64 whites were lynched and 49 Blacks.

In 1890, 11 whites were lynched and 85 Blacks.

In 1898, 19 whites were lynched and 101 Blacks.

And in 1914, 4 whites were lynched and 51 Blacks.

Data has been collected by the NAACP and Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. According to Tuskegee the highest amount of lynchings have occurred against African-Americans in the following states:

Texas between 1882 and 1968, 352 blacks and 141 whites have been lynched.

In Louisiana during the same period 335 Blacks and 56 whites were lynched.

In Florida 257 Blacks and 25 whites were lynched.

In Georgia 492 Blacks and 39 whites have been lynched.

In Arkansas 226 Blacks and 58 whites have been lynched.

In Alabama 299 Blacks and 48 whites have been lynched.

However, in Colorado 65 whites have been lynched and only 3 Black.

In California 41 whites have been lynched and 2 Blacks.

In Oklahoma 82 whites have been lynched and 40 Blacks.

In New York 1 white has been lynched and 1 Black.

In Vermont 1 white has been lynched and no Blacks.

In Wisconsin 6 Whites have been lynched and no Blacks.)

According to Nicholas Von Hoffman in *The New York Observer*, August 7, 2005, "An Apology for Lynching Does Nothing for Victims" [in a Senate resolution it was noted that] "nearly 200 anti-lynching bills were introduced to the Congress during the first half of the 20th century . . ." and "between 1890 and 1952, seven Presidents petitioned Congress to end lynching, and from 1920 to 1940 the House of Representatives passed three strong anti-lynching measures . . . Neither Senator from Mississippi signed the resolution's list of sponsors . . . [nor]

signed a statement condemning racial murder." Two Texan senators refused to sign. . . . The final paragraph of the article states "The survivors and descendants of the lynched which includes (African Americans) some Jews, some Italians, homosexuals, labor union organizers and political dissidents—have paid socially, psychologically and financially for the violence done to their families. They are owed better than a piece of paper embossed with the Senate's letterhead." —

Additional Recommended Reading:

"Without Sanctuary" by Leon F. Litwack, James Allen, John Lewis, 2000

"At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black Americans" by Philip Dray, 2003

"100 Years of Lynchings" by Robert Ginzburg, 1996

—Compiled by Howardena Pindell

Minstrelsy

Minstrelsy, a theater form used first by white performers who covered their faces with burnt cork or black greasepaint and dressed up in outlandish costumes as plantation slaves, imitating Black musical and dance forms and performing skits mocking African-Americans which led to "proliferating racist stereotypes abroad," Dr. Grace Carroll states in "The Significance of Face." These images are intensely powerful in both their literal statements and their ability to allow the viewer to create a context through the bias of their own associations. Generations of African-Americans have suffered grievous injury at the hands of people whose livelihood was derived from creating and reinforcing stereotypes thorough black-face minstrelsy. The creation of a stereotype was an essential element in maintaining white America's illusion of superiority. It characterized Blacks as buffoons and tricksters, as inherently lazy and immoral and perennial children who were dependent on the paternalism of (their) 'masters' for survival. Slavery, even the post- emancipation more subliminal variety, was contingent on making its victims appear to be less than human."

The first black-face white minstrels performed in 1789 and the first African-American minstrels performed in 1840. "African-American minstrels were often attacked by whites, states James Hatch and J. C. Handy (1873-1958, known as 'Father of the Blues') spoke about the train car carrying African-American minstrels being riddled with bullets by whites racists as it rode through Orange, Texas. There were also special sleeping cars built for African-American performers to provide them with accommodations since the racist climate in the South made other lodging difficult if not dangerous. The Black performers wore black-face make-up, as did the white men, and soon became famous, changing the shows into an entertaining parody with characters such as Jim Crow as a stereotypical carefree slave and Mr. Tambo a joyous musician. Some of the most famous songs in America such as "Oh Sussanah" and "My Old Kentucky Home"

were introduced as minstrel songs. Outside of the South, African-American minstrel shows could critique racism and “champion the abolitionist cause.” Dark-faced iconography appeared in Holland as Black Peter “introducing racist images to Dutch children,” in Cape Town, South Africa in 1848 “where former Javanese and Malaysian slaves took up the minstrel tradition” and were also “associated with racism and bigotry in New Zealand and Thailand.”

White performers have also used yellow-face, brown-face and red-face to mock Asians, East Indians and Native Americans. American actors Al Jolson, Eddie Cantor, Bing Crosby and Bob Hope also performed in black-face starting in the 1920s. And white-face was used by African-American actors in the movie *White Chicks* (2004). “There is also a tradition of representing white Europeans in West African folk theater and puppetry with performers wearing white masks and white gloves.” Sometimes “black-face related to the blackened faces associated with mining.”

Minstrel shows continued to be popular into the 1950s at American high schools and fraternities. Perhaps their contemporary equivalent are the rappers and white rock stars imitating black musicians.

Compiled from the following sources:

“Back Magic: A Pictorial History of Black Entertainers in America,” by Langston Hughes and Milton Meltzer, 1967.

“Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America,” by Robert Toll, 1974.

“Surviving Zwarte Piet—A Black Mother in the Netherlands Copes with a Racist Institution in Dutch Culture,” by Pamela-Armstrong De Vreeze, *Essence Magazine*, 1997

<http://afroamhistory.about.com/od/minstrely/a/minstrely.htm>

<http://www.nationmaster.com/encyclopedia/Blackface>

—Compiled by Howardena Pindell, Cynthia Navaretta and Professor James Hatch.

Ida B. Wells Barnett 1862-1931

Born in Holly Springs, Mississippi months prior to the Emancipation Proclamation. Her parents were freed slaves and they and Ida’s sibling died from yellow fever in 1880.

Throughout her life, Ida B. Wells was a civil rights and women’s suffrage movement activist. Although the women’s suffrage movement required black women to stand in the back of the train, in 1884 she refused to relinquish her seat to a white man on the Chesapeake, Ohio and South Western Railroad (71 years before Rose Parks made her statement). She was forcibly removed from the train as whites applauded.

In 1889 she became editor and co-owner of *Free Speech and the Headlight*, an anti-racist journal/newspaper in Memphis. Three of her African-American friends who owned the People’s Grocery Company were lynched for “competing

with a white business." After she published an article about the lynching she was forced to flee Memphis and moved to Chicago where she and her attorney husband, published the *Chicago Conservator* and *Red Record* which covered the vicious legacy of lynching and supported and defended its victims.

In 1892 she published a broadside pamphlet, "Southern Horrors—Lynch Law in All its Phases," and boycotted the 1893 World's Columbia Exposition in Chicago. [The Chicago Exposition achieved great recognition for its Woman's Building which showcased the achievements of (white) women in all phases of American life.] Her acts of defiance were highly praised by Frederick Douglass. At one point she was threatened with being tried for treason for daring to talk about racism and lynching in the United States.

In 1909, she helped found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

Compiled by Howardena Pindell from "The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow," by Richard Wormser; Wikipedia websites and "Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells," by A. Duster, 1970; and "Black Foremothers," by D. Sterling; and "Ida B. Wells-Barnett and her Passion for Justice, Black Women, African American Women, Suffrage, Women's Movement. Civil Rights Leaders."

<http://www.duke.edu/~ldbaker/classes/AAIH/caah/ibwells/ibwbkgrd/html>

The Life of Frederick Douglass

Frederick Douglass was born into slavery on the Eastern Shore of Maryland in 1818, and was given the name Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey (Baly), after his mother Harriet Bailey. During the course of his remarkable life he escaped from slavery, became internationally renowned for his eloquence in the cause of liberty, and went on to serve the national government in several official capacities. Through his work he came into contact with many of the leaders of his times. His early work in the cause of freedom brought him into contact with a wide array of abolitionists and social reformers, including William Lloyd Garrison, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, John Brown, Gerrit Smith and many others. As a major Stationmaster on the Underground Railroad he directly helped hundreds on their way to freedom through his adopted home city of Rochester, NY.

Renowned for his eloquence, he lectured throughout the U.S. and England on the brutality and immorality of slavery. As a publisher his *North Star* and *Frederick Douglass' Paper* brought news of the anti-slavery movement to thousands. Forced to leave the country to avoid arrest after John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry, he returned to become a staunch advocate of the Union cause. He helped recruit African American troops for the Union Army, and his personal relationship with Lincoln helped persuade the President to make emancipation a cause of the Civil War. Two of Douglass' sons served in the 54th Massachusetts

Regiment, which was made up entirely of African American volunteers. The storming of Fort Wagner by this regiment was dramatically portrayed in the film *Glory!* A painting of this event hangs in the front hall at Cedar Hill (Douglass's last home on the heights overlooking Anacostia, Washington, with a view of the U.S. Capitol.)

All of Douglass' children were born of his marriage to Anna Murray. He met Murray, a free African American, in Baltimore while he was still held in slavery. They were married soon after his escape to freedom. After the death of his first wife, Douglass married his former secretary, Helen Pitts, of Rochester, N.Y. Douglass dismissed the controversy over his marriage to a white woman, saying that in his first marriage he had honored his mother's race, and in his second marriage, his father's.

In 1872, Douglass moved to Washington, D.C. where he initially served as publisher of the *New National Era*, which was intended to carry forward the work of elevating the position of African Americans in the post-Emancipation period. This enterprise was discontinued when the promised financial backing failed to materialize. In this period Douglass also served briefly as President of the Freedmen's National Bank, and subsequently in various national service positions, including U.S. Marshal for the District of Columbia, and diplomatic positions in Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

References related to Frederick Douglass and his life:

The Underground Railroad was neither "underground" nor a "railroad," but was a loose network of aid and assistance to fugitives from bondage. Perhaps as many as one hundred thousand enslaved persons may have escaped in the years between the American Revolution and the Civil War.

In 1990, Congress authorized the National Park Service to conduct a study of the Underground Railroad, its routes and operations in order to preserve and interpret this aspect of United States history. This study includes a general overview of the Underground Railroad, with a brief discussion of slavery and abolitionism, escape routes used by slaves, and alternatives for commemoration and interpretation of the significance of the phenomenon.

National Park Service Sites:

Underground Railroad Special Resource Study

Harpers Ferry National Historic Park

Women's Rights National Historical Park

The National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom

Aboard the Underground Railroad: A National Register Travel Itinerary

Other Frederick Douglass Sites:

The Frederick Douglass Papers at the Library of Congress

The Library of Congress - African-American Mosaic

Frederick Douglass Museum and Cultural Center (Rochester, NY)

The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave by Himself
A biography of the life of Frederick Douglass by Sandra Thomas (University of Rochester)

The Underground Railroad in New York State

The Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition

The Frederick Douglass Papers Project

National Underground Railroad Freedom Center

Fannie Lou Hammer 1917-1977

Fannie Lou Hammer was born in Ruleville, Mississippi, early in life she contracted polio and was unable to receive adequate treatment since the hospitals were restricted.

In 1962, she became an ardent voter registration and voters' rights activist in the days of hard-line segregation when African-Americans faced separate entrances, segregated phone booths, schools, restaurants, hotels, public bathrooms, train cars, military, waiting rooms, elevators, hospitals, cemeteries, drinking fountains, swimming pools, churches, libraries and stores. Coca-cola machines could be used by whites only well into the 1950s. Textbook given to a black student would never be redistributed; Blacks and whites could not work in the same room; Blacks were denied access to parks, beaches, picnic areas, and museums and were barred from a number of hospitals. In some cases there were even curfews for Blacks.

Her family, hoping to earn a living bought land and farm animals but jealous, racist white neighbors poisoned all of their animals. (See: "Banished: How Whites Drive Black Americans Out of Town," directed by Marco Williams, DVD, 2007. It explores the intentional destruction of Black towns in Tulsa, Oklahoma and Rosewood, Florida. Where whites were never prosecuted for these crimes.)

When Hammer started her voter registration activities, written literacy tests were required for registration as well as payment of a poll tax to discourage Black voters. She was fired from her job after participating in voter registration activities and in 1963, in Winona, Mississippi, the police arrested her and several other voter registration workers, beating them so severely that Hammer was disabled. That same night that she and the voter registration workers were beaten, Medgar Evers (1925-1962) was shot in the back by a white racist in front of his home and his family. The police were acquitted for beating Fannie Lou Hammer and her companions. The man who murdered Evers received life in prison after three trials. Evers had been investigating violent crimes against Blacks and school segregation among a number of other issues for the NAACP

in Jackson, Mississippi.

Fannie Lou Hammer helped create the Mississippi Democratic Party and appealed to the Democratic convention in 1964 to truly represent the voting population of Mississippi. For the remainder of her life she helped the poor of Ruleville, Mississippi, opening a day care center and made plans for a garment factory to create jobs. She also started the Free Farm Collective.

Compiled by Howardena Pindell from the following source:

"For Freedom's Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hammer," by Chana Kai Lee, 2000.

Rosa Parks 1913-2005

Born in Tuskegee, Alabama, her first act of defiance occurred in 1943 when she was ejected from a bus because she refused to enter by the back entrance. Although one of the first bus boycotts was in Baton Rouge, Louisiana in 1953 and Virginia and Montgomery, Alabama in 1954, Rosa Parks, already known for her defiance of segregation laws is best remembered for her arrest on December 1, 1955 for sitting in the restricted white section of a bus. Ninety-eight percent of Montgomery, Alabama's African-American citizens, participated in the 38-day bus boycott set off by Rosa Parks' arrest and the boycott spread to Tallahassee, Florida.

As a result she was fired from her job and harassed into leaving Alabama. She moved to Detroit where she worked with Congressman John Conyers. She continued to lecture throughout the United States and South Africa. In 1987 she founded the Rosa and Raymond Parks Institute for Self Development and received the 1999 Congressional Gold Medal, the highest civilian honor. At her death in October 2006, her body was placed in the Rotunda in Washington, D.C.

Compiled from several sources by Howardena Pindell including:

Educational Forum; <http://www.guardian.co.uk/usa/story/0,12271,1600274.00.html>

"Rosa Parks My Story," by Rosa Parks, 1999,

"Quiet Strength, by Rosa Parks," 2000;

"Quiet Strength: Working for Equality," by Rosa Parks, Fiona Mac Donald and Winnie Mandela, 1988.

Harriet Tubman (Araminta Ross) 1820-1917

Born in Dorchester, Maryland, to enslaved parents on a plantation in Dorchester County, near the Blackwater River. During her time enslaved, she was beaten and whipped and as a child received a head injury from a slave owner who, in a psychopathic rage, threw a heavy object striking her in the head. As a result of the beatings she became disabled.

In 1849 she fled to Philadelphia and despite the bounty on her and the risk

of re-enslavement if captured, she made many return trips to Maryland to rescue others. In thirteen trips she rescued and escorted seventy enslaved individuals along the Underground Railroad. And even though Congress had passed the "Fugitive Slave Law" in 1850, which punished anyone who helped an enslaved person escape, she was helped by many white abolitionists, activists and Quakers. Walking at night, she often brought enslaved Africans to Canada and helped them find employment.

Tubman also worked as a scout and a nurse, among other jobs, for the Union Army during the Civil War. She freed over 700 slaves during a raid on Combed River. Although she received a Civil War widow's pension, her humanitarianism often left her impoverished. She managed to buy land near Auburn, New York, an area known for its anti-slavery efforts.

Once, traveling by train, she was told to move to the smoking car and the white conductor and passengers broke her arm trying to force her into the other car but failed in their efforts to move her and to throw her off the train. She worked in the women's suffrage movement with Susan B. Anthony, and was the keynote speaker at the first meeting of the National Federation of the African-American Women founded in 1896.

Tubman was buried with military honors at Fort Hill Cemetery in Auburn, and her home is now a museum and education center.

Compiled by Howardena Pindell from the following sources: Wikipedia: Harriet Tubman; "Harriet Tubman: The Road to Freedom" by Catherine Clinton, 2004; "Harriet Tubman. The Life and Stories" by Jean Humez, 2003; "Bound for the Promised Land: Harriet Tubman: Portrait of An American Hero" by Kate Clifford Larson, 2004; "Freedom Train: The Story of Harriet Tubman" by Dorothy Sterling, 1970.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

NAJJAR ABDUL-MUSAWWIR, known as NAJJAR, is an Associate Professor of fine arts at Southern Illinois University Carbondale and an award-winning painter, community arts organizer, educator and consultant, who has exhibited and lectured widely. His Islamic belief and abstract paintings are used to develop his artwork from an African-American experience. His philosophy: "Inspiration from Allah (Al = One and lah = God) must be in the soul to produce Islamic art in any human experience."

CAMILLE BILLOPS, New York artist, filmmaker and occasional writer, with her husband, poet Jim Hatch, founded the Hatch-Billops Archives of Black American Cultural History which is now part of the Arts Archive at Emory University, Atlanta.

BETTY BLAYTON TAYLOR is a New York painter and sculptor and the founder and director of the renowned Children's Art Carnival.

CAMILLE ANN BREWER, a former curator at the Detroit Institute of the Arts, is presently curator of the Mott-Warsh Foundation Collection in Flint, Michigan. She is also a teacher, weaver and art appraiser.

KIRSTEN PAI BUICK, a member of the younger generation of African American scholars and art historians is a professor at the University of New Mexico. Her areas of research and teaching are arts of the Colonial British N.A.; African American art; critical gender and race theory; and popular culture. Her book on the sculptor Edmonia Lewis was recently published by Duke University Press.

GREGORY COATES, born 1961, is a New York artist who makes multimedia paintings, sculptural installations and photographs that explore the formal properties of materials, the politics of identity and the artist's personal history.

BOB DILLWORTH is a painter and installation artist and a professor of art and African American History at the University of Rhode Island.

GLORIA DULAN-WILSON lives in Brooklyn, New York, is a journalist and community activist.

CAY FATIMA is a New York native and performance artist whose pen name is T.W.O. (Third World Order).

THEODORE A. HARRIS, artist and educator lives in Philadelphia. His collages appear with Amiri Baraka's captions and Introduction in a recently published book, *Our Flesh of Flames*.

SONJI HUNT is a visual artist living in Milwaukee, Wisconsin and has taught studio courses at several universities.

RASHIDAH ISMALI-ABUBAKR originally from West Africa, is a writer, scholar and cultural critic. Her poetry and essays are widely anthologized and she has three books of poetry and a play in print.

She hosts the Salon d'Afrique where artists from Africa and the Diaspora meet, exhibit and discuss their work and current and past histories. She writes non-scholarly work under Rashida Ismaili. Currently she teaches in the graduate MA and MFA Creative Writing Department at Wilkes University, Wilkes-Barre, PA. She lives in Harlem and is involved in preserving this historical community from the aggressive destruction of the real estate industry.

F. GEOFFREY JOHNSON is a poet and visual artist and a graduate of Morehouse College. He has self-published two collections of poetry, *Smells I See* and *Restoration*, and his poetry has appeared in several literary journals, most recently in CRUX: Anthology, 2007; The Caribbean Writer, Volume 22; International Literary Anthology, 2008; and Black Magnolias Literary Journal, January 2009.

BEN JONES is an artist, activist and art professor at New Jersey City University.

CHARLOTTE KA attended Cooper Union, earned her BFA from Carnegie Mellon University and MFA from Maryland Institute of Art. Originally from Pittsburgh, she now lives and works in New York City and is part of a group of artists who experiment with non-tradition materials and installations as a means of making Western art connected to Black culture. For the past ten years she has concentrated on encaustic paintings and installations. Her installations are inspired by historic events that focus on the power of the spirit to overcome obstacles as in her "You can burn down the churches but you cannot burn down *The Church*," done in response to the horrible rash of church burnings in the U.S. in the 1990s.

KARSTEN KREDEL lives in Berlin and studied North American and African as well as contemporary German literature both in Berlin and at Harvard University. He works as a freelance reader for the Berlin publisher Aufbau Verlag as well as for the cultural section of *the taz*. He has also translated numerous short stories from English to German for various publishers.

HOWARD McCALEBB is a sculptor and active figure on the international art scene. He received his M.F.A. in Sculpture from Cornell University in 1972, and his B.A. in Sculpture from California State University, at Hayward in 1970, and has exhibited his art throughout the U. S., Europe, and Asia. He has taught fine art at San Jose State University, in California; the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Hunter College, Cornell University, Graduate School of Pratt Institute, Parsons School of Design, and Amherst College, and lectured at the China National Academy of Fine Arts and at Hangzhou Academy of Fine Art. In 2008 he established a working a studio and founded (*Kunstraum*) **DADA Post**, in Berlin, Germany.

DINDGA McCANNON is a New York based painter, printmaker and illustrator; a founding member of the African American women artists' group, Where We At, and an active member of the African American artists group, Weusi.

TAD MIKE is a graduate of Cooper Union. He is an artist and Master Printer and a contributor to *Epikouria: Fine Food and Drinks of Greece*. He is co-author of *The Architecture of Horace Gifford* to be published in 2010.

HOWARDENA PINDELL was born in Philadelphia and has lived in New York City since 1967, when, after completing her graduate degree at Yale University, she went to work at the Museum of Modern Art eventually becoming curator in the Department of Prints and Illustrated Books. Although she is known primarily as an artist, she has extensive writing, teaching and administrative experience. She continues to paint and write and has been a Professor in the Department of Art at the State University of New York at Stony Brook since 1979.

HELEN EVANS RAMSARAN has lived and worked in New York City since 1973, combining her work as a sculptor and professor of art at John Jay College of the City University of New York. Her work has been widely exhibited internationally and throughout the U.S. Her most recent exhibitions (2008) include: "African American Artists on Paper," SUNY, Genesee, NY; "Something to Look Forward To," Flint Institute of Arts, Michigan; Morris Museum of Art, Augusta, Georgia and HUB-Roberson Galleries, Penn State University, Pennsylvania.

SENGHOR REID, born 1976, earned a BFA from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, a Masters in Art Education from Wayne State University, Detroit and also attended the New York School of Drawing, Painting and Sculpture. His figurative paintings and mixed media works fuse hip-hop culture with the lives and work of other visual artists, the undercurrent of politics and the conservation of our natural environment.

GILDA SNOWDEN lives in Detroit and received her BFA, MA and MFA from Wayne State University. She has been exhibiting her work since 1977 in galleries and museums around the country. In 2004 she was honored with the Vision and Excellence in the Arts Award from the National Conference of Artists, and the Alain Locke Award from the Friends of African & African American Art, an auxiliary of the Detroit Institute of Arts. In 2008 she received the prestigious Spirit of Detroit Award for her sustained artistry and dedication to the community.

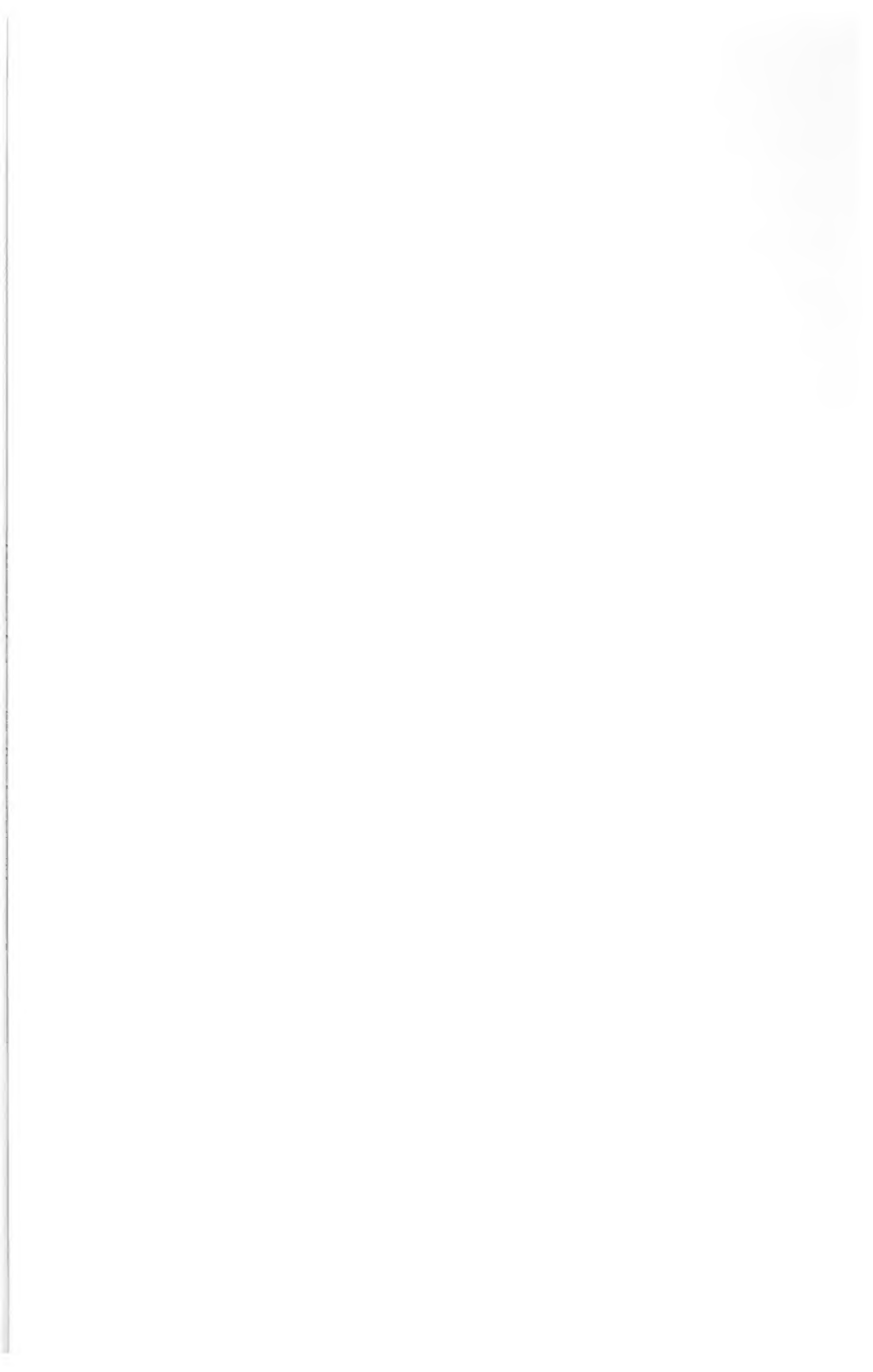
ED SPRIGGS attended the California School of Fine Arts and received his B.A. from San Francisco State College. He is an independent art appraiser and curator and also a poet, artist, filmmaker, and former director of two significant African American museums.

ASIBA TUPAHACHE is a Native American from the Matinacock Nation of Long Island, NY. She has written several books on racism from a Native American perspective, is an artist and educator, and can be heard regularly on African American radio talk shows and WBAI-Pacifica in New York.

HARRY J. WEIL is enrolled in the MA/PhD program in Art History and Criticism at Stony Brook University, NY. He is a contributing reviewer to *artUS* magazine and this essay is his first major published work. His research interests are focused in performance art and theory, with special attention to the psychoanalytic theories of narcissism. However, from an early stage in his art history education he has had a fond interest for black feminist art and wishes to continue researching this all too often ignored field.

CLARENCE D. WHITE, born 1946, is an African American critic and conceptual artist living in Atlanta, Georgia. He is a former resident of Chicago where he was affiliated with the Art Institute and director of a private gallery, and is a collector of African American art.

SHIRLEY WOODSON is a painter and creator of book works and assemblages. She has lived in Detroit since completing her graduate degree at Wayne State University. Her work is in many public and private collections, including the White House.



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